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SMYTH

JEFF
LEMLE



A.C.

AFTER DEATH™

BOOK TWO

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A.D.: After Death created by Scott Snyder & Jeff Lemire

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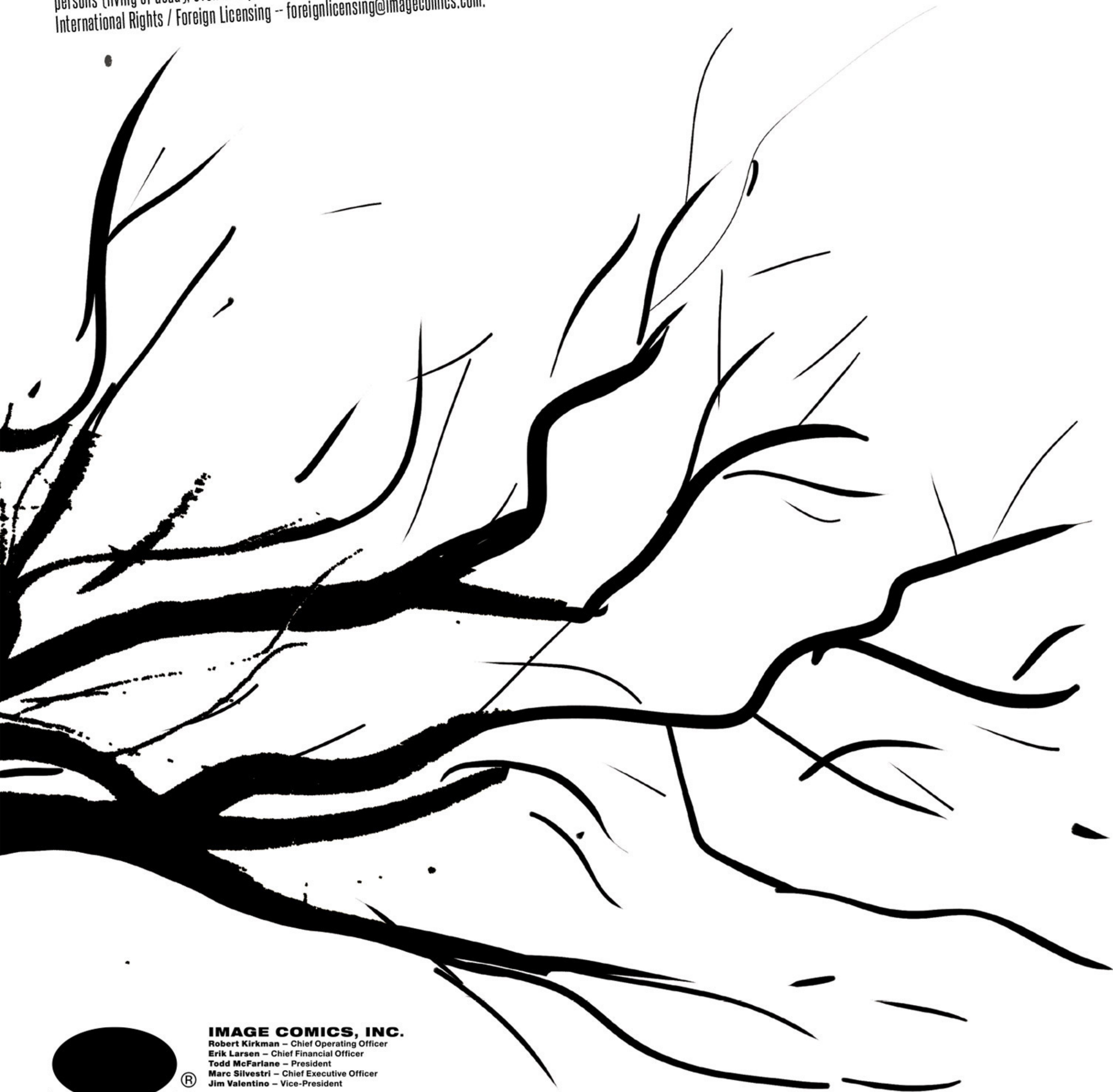
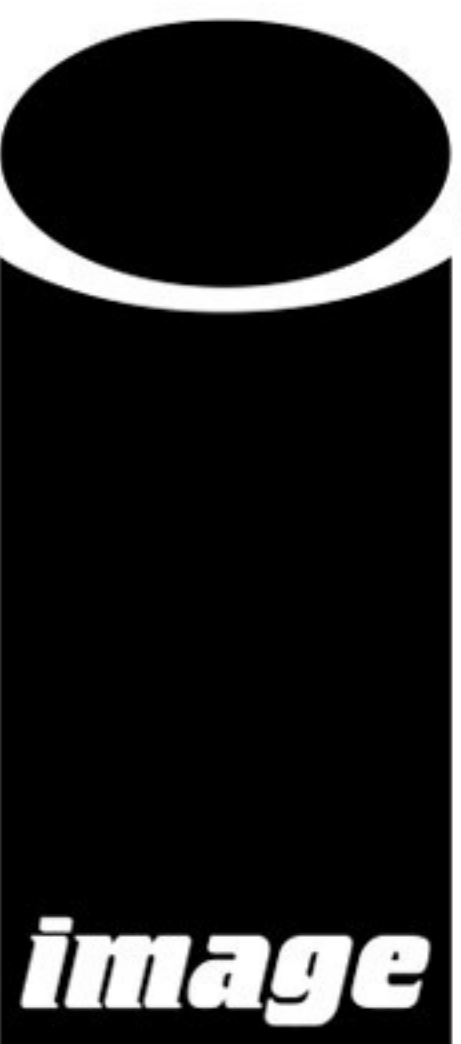
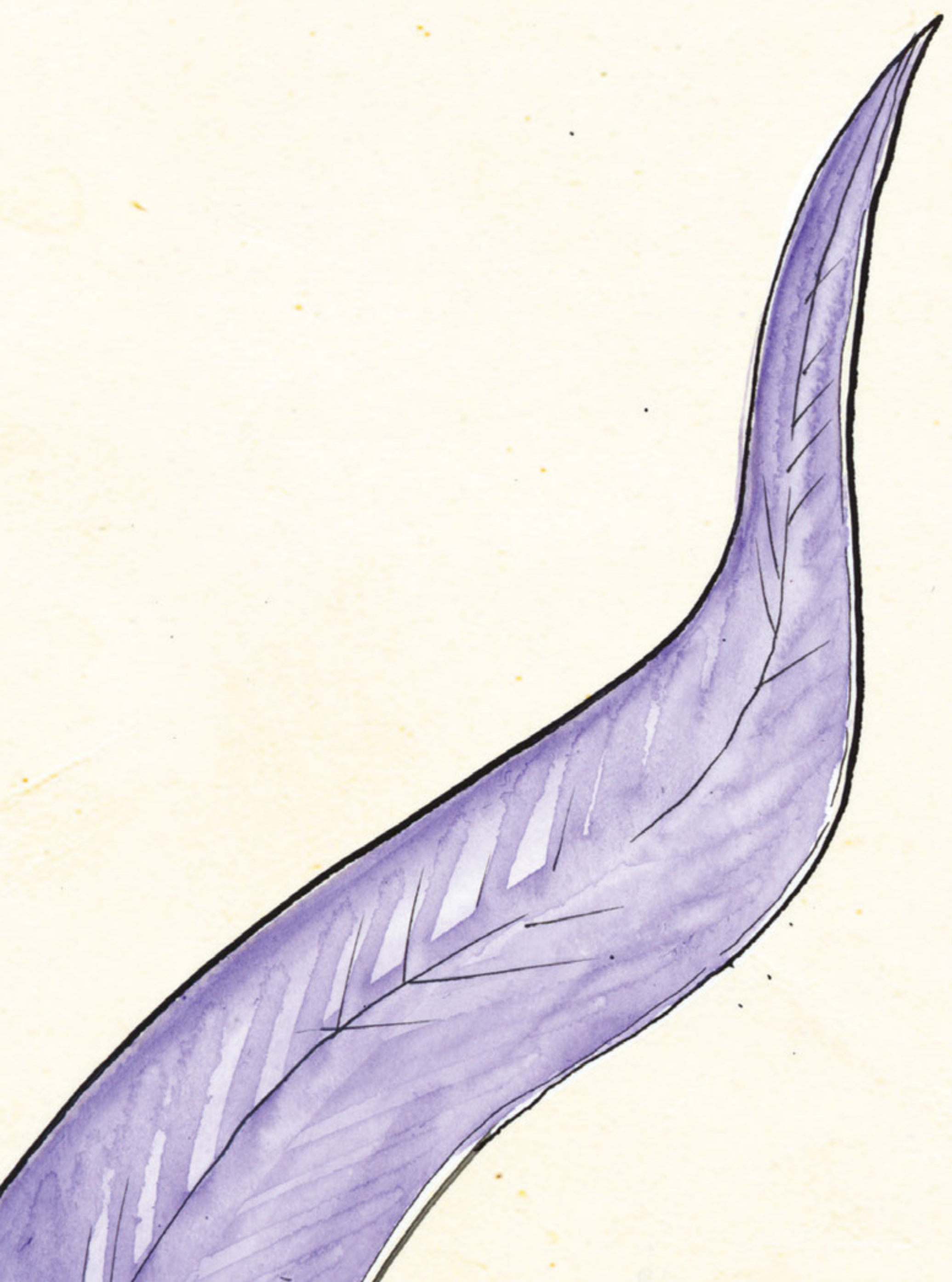
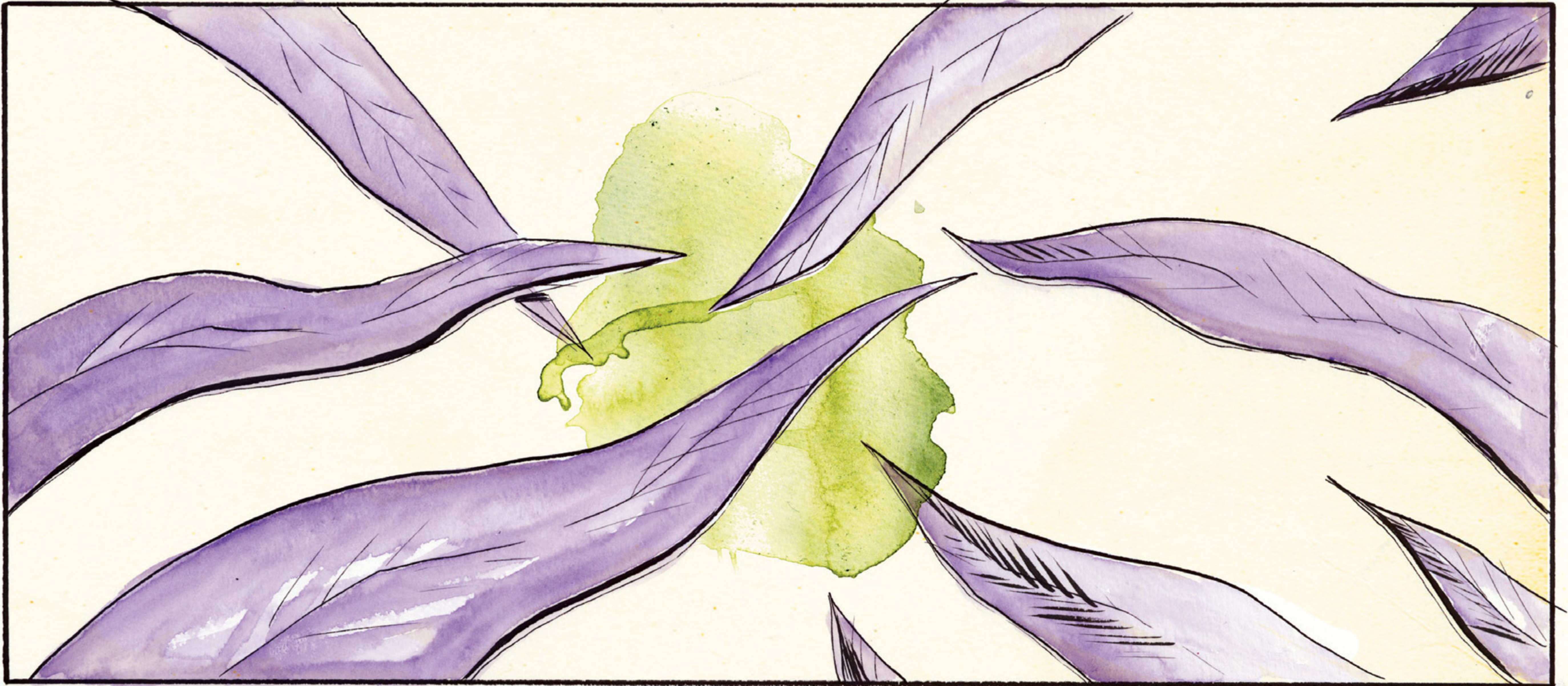
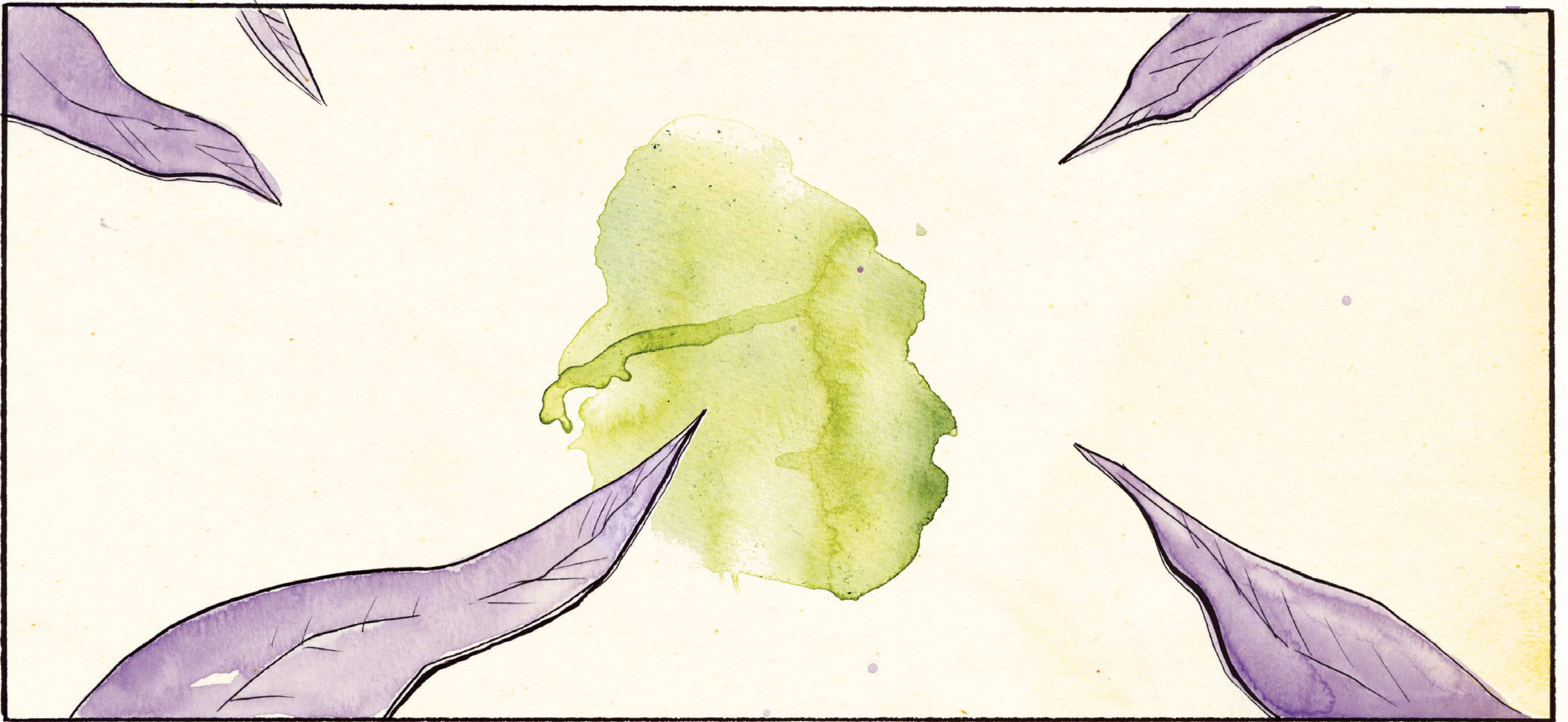


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MY NAME
IS JONAH
COOKE!

AND I'M
COMING
DOWN!

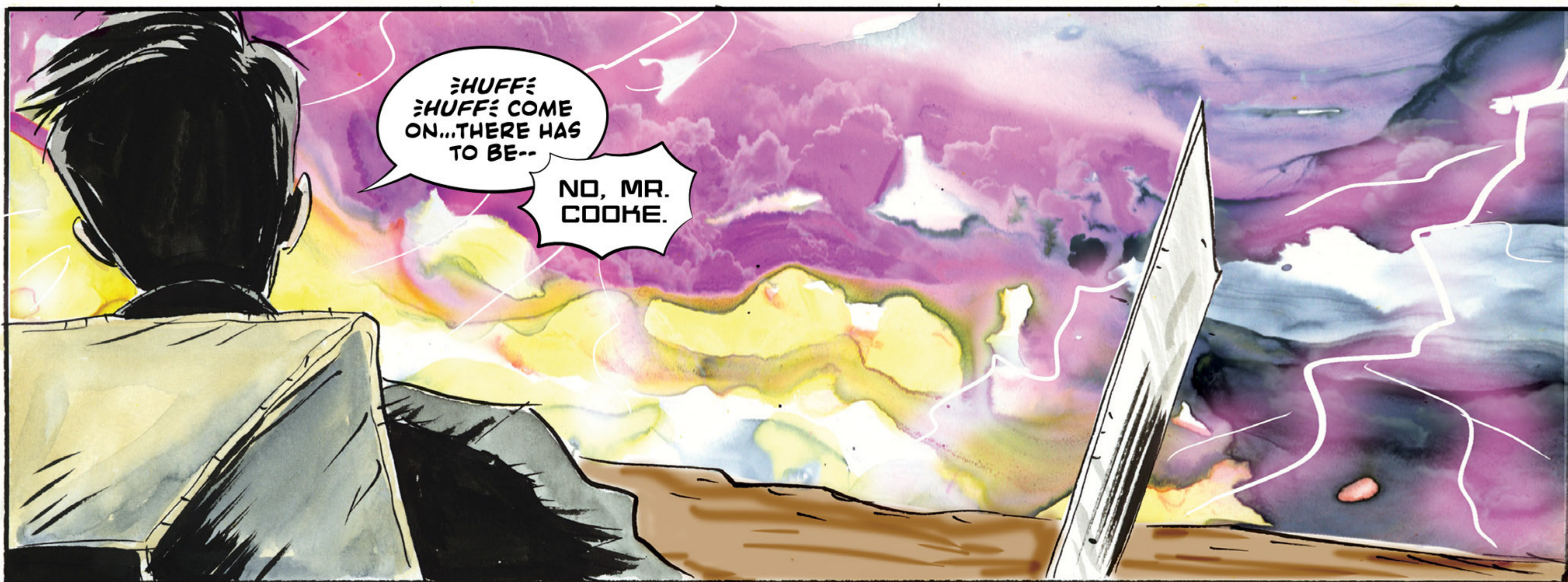


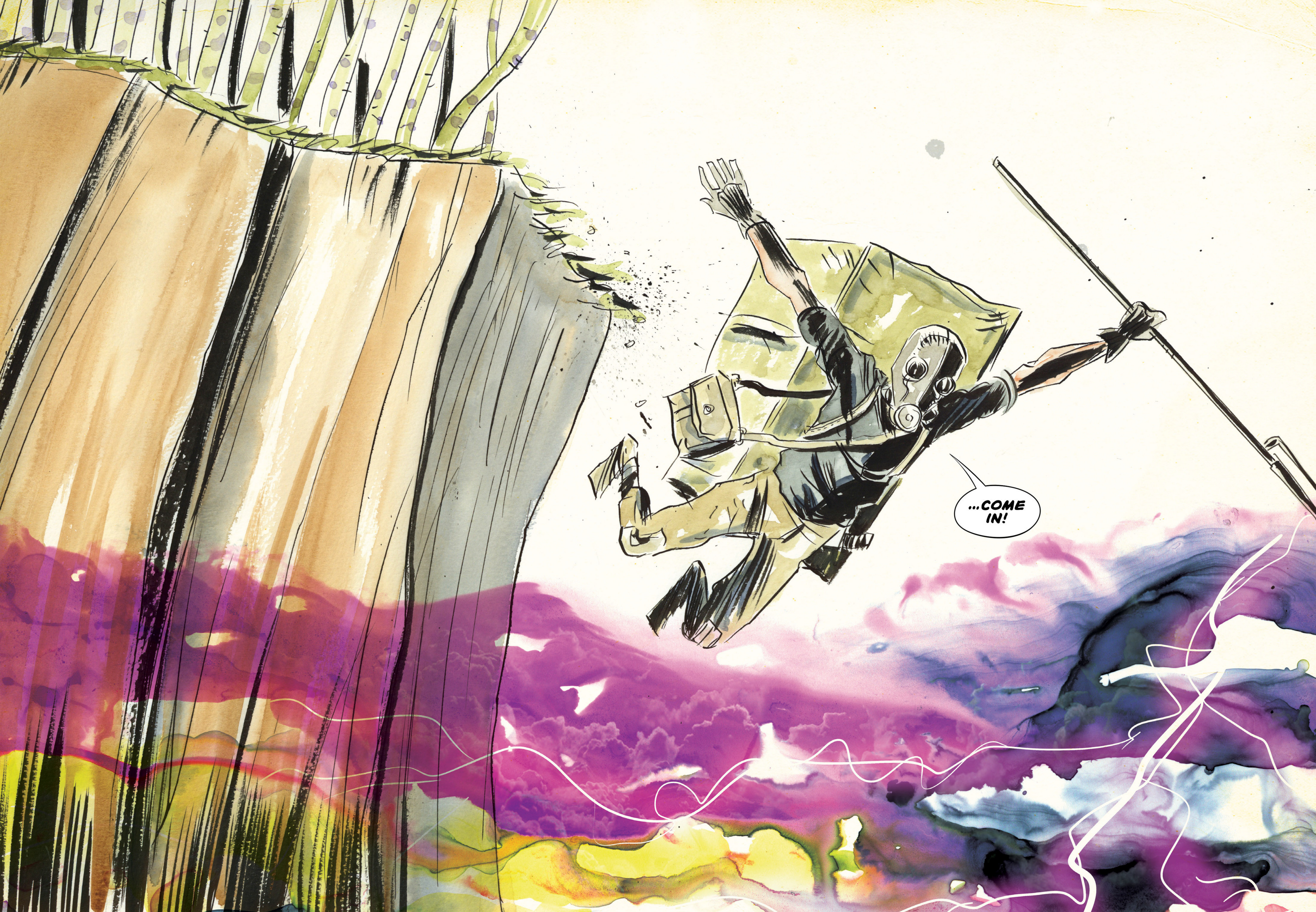
FORAGER,
DO YOU
READ?!



DAMMIT,
CAN YOU HEAR
ME?! IS THERE
ANYONE DOWN
TH--







...COME
IN!



PART TWO
THE GOODBYE SUIT



The morning I learned about the cure for death, I was waiting on a call from Athens, Georgia, about an item I'd stolen.

The call was a few weeks in the making--the person on the other end was going to give me the verdict on whether the theft had been successful or not--and so I was on edge. The item in question was owned by a late, great country singer. It had taken a good deal of effort to set up, and while I was confident things had gone well, there was still a chance that the math had collapsed. This might mean nothing--might mean that nothing had gotten started, no harm no foul, and I'd have to try again some other time. Or it might mean that things had fallen apart, and that now the item was in the back of a police car and an investigation was about to begin.

To take my mind off all this, I decided to spend the morning out on the porch with my neighbor Bud Hunter. Bud lived in the condo next to mine and, once in a while, we would meet out on our adjacent porches for what he called "a wake-up brandy." It was April 1, April Fool's Day, but in one of those freak happenings, it had snowed the night before, and the grounds were blotted out with white. It was a Saturday, and I had nothing planned for the weekend. I was thirty-nine years old. The call was supposed to come ten minutes from the time I sat down with Bud.

"I'm telling you, it's the end of weather," said Bud, deliberately catching water from an icicle in his brandy. He was in his seventies, bald with a steep, cliff-like brow and misty white eyebrows. "This planet...it'll never be right again, like how it was when I saw it from space."

Bud had been an astronaut--an actual astronaut in the early 1970s.

He'd flown on two missions, one to the short-lived US space station Skylab in 1973, where he'd helped discover coronal holes in the sun, and another in 1975, which had almost killed everyone involved.

There'd been an accident on the way up during this second mission, was the thing. An oxygen tank had blown, venting gas and crippling the command console, forcing the men to use the service module as a kind of sealed-off life raft.

The accident caused a communications blackout with Earth as well. And, for a good few hours, the men were adrift in the dark.

Three men sealed up in a compartment hardly bigger than an elevator, hurtling deeper into space, with no end in sight.

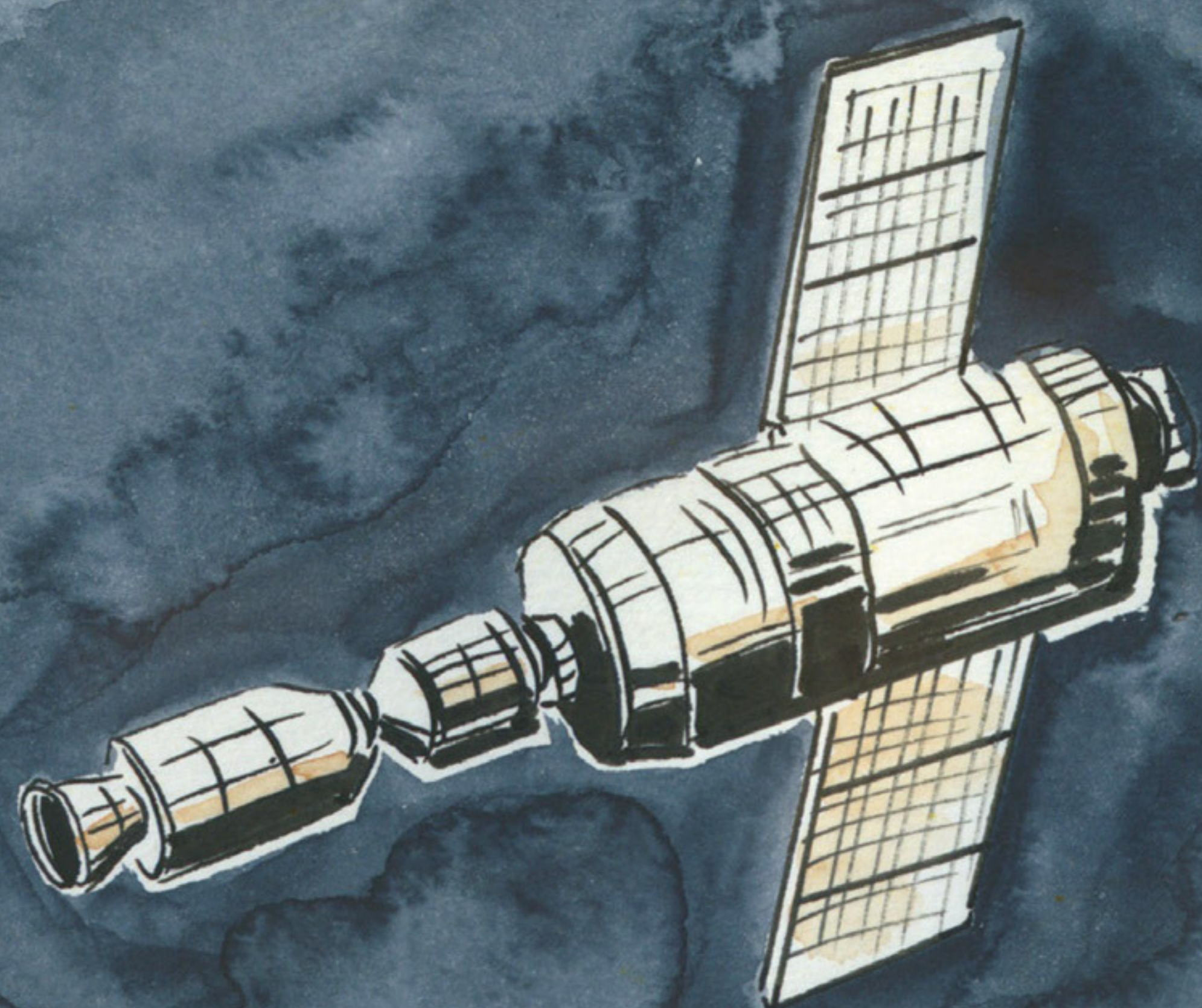
To get back to Earth, Bud and his crew had to perform the same dangerous maneuver the crew of the Apollo 13 had executed--they had to slingshot around the dark side of the moon in order to get enough thrust to achieve a return trajectory.

They'd managed all this in relative darkness and radio silence, circling the farthest lunar curve on January 15, 1975. Their route actually took them farther out into space than any mission in human history--to this day, Bud and his crewmates hold the record for greatest distance from Earth by a manned spacecraft.

"I was at the south end of the module, too," Bud has said to me on many occasions. "Meaning, I was the farthest of us from Earth by a good five feet, the farthest distance any living thing has EVER traveled from this rock."

Once, I asked him if he was scared during that blacked-out period, the three of them alone in that steel bubble, adrift on a sea of death.

The biggest risk, he'd explained, was that they'd come around the moon so quickly that the momentum would fling them off course, causing them to miss the Earth and float off into darkness forever.

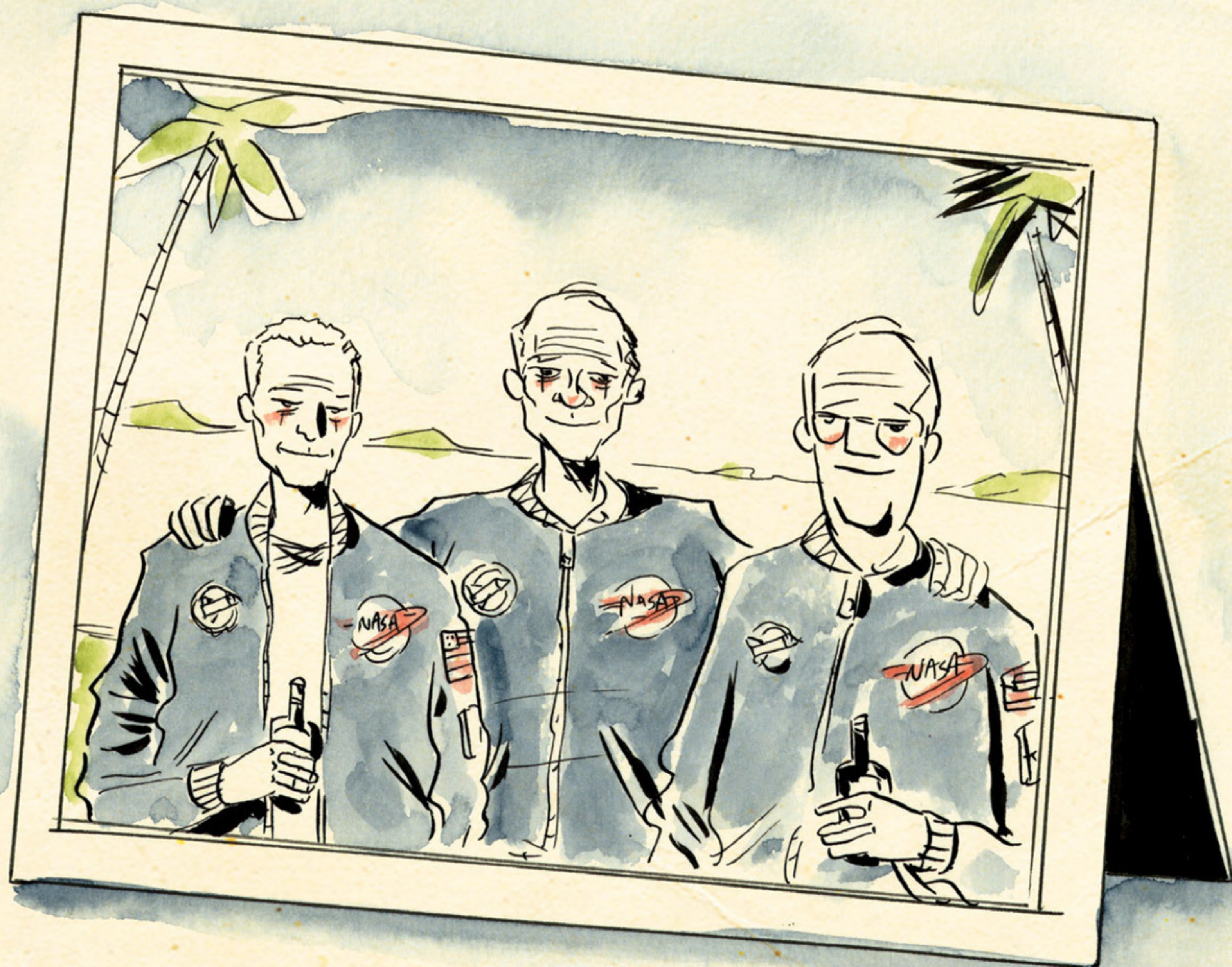


"Sure, we were scared," he'd said. "Tommy, though, he started this gag that we'd be LUCKY to float off. We'd wake up in a thousand years, on a planet of curvy green alien girls. We talked about it the whole way around, to take our minds off it."

Bud gets together with the men from that mission a couple times a year--Tommy Gunnerson and Will Webb. In fact, looking back, they were supposed to get together on the day in question, the day I learned about the cure for dying. Inside Bud's condo were chips and beer. Pictures from their flight, framed on the kitchen counter. They always wore their NASA windbreakers and hats when they got together. They'd call me over--they were friendly that way--and we'd get drunk and they'd tell me the story about flying past the dark side of the moon and how they came THIS CLOSE to being kings of a sexy female alien race.

"Think of it," Bud would say to us all, getting to his feet, spreading his arms..."They're all around us, women, eight feet tall and green."

"Five bosoms," Tommy would say through his oxygen tube, and laugh-cough.





In my condo were the helmets Bud and his crew had worn on their failed mission. I'd acquired them a couple weeks earlier from a small museum in Texas near the old launch complex--stolen them, to be fair--and I'd been waiting to give them to the three men since their last visit. I thought about going in and giving them to Bud now, showing him his at least, which was in the best shape of the three, but I decided to wait. He knew I was a part-time thief, and he could get moral on me sometimes. With his friends there, drunk and happy, I was sure he'd simply be glad to be reunited with his helmet.

I checked my watch.

My call should have come by now.

Most people, when they think of thieves, picture all sorts of adventure.

A man in black descending like a spider through a web of lasers. Or someone in a speedboat holding a flute of champagne, racing away from a moonlit wharf while the police are left behind to curse and kick the pilings. In the early twenty-first century, though, being a thief wasn't about glamour or adventure. I wish it had been. I wish it had been hushed conversations on some Italian lake, or blueprints projected on the wall of a chalet.

But theft just before the cure--before A.D. 1--was nothing glamorous. It was plain people behind plain computer screens; it was Post-its and mugs of old coffee. Because theft back then was largely theoretical--logic problems and systems analyses. For the most part, it took place in temporary forums on the darknet called "tables."

Momentary TOR/Torch rooms that appeared and vanished in minutes, collapsing into code.

In these forums, the "head of table" would pose a problem to rest of the members, and those members would compete to solve the problem, sometimes for fun, sometimes for real. If you stole in theory, you were called "bread," on account of there being no risk, everything free. If you stole for real, you were "steak," as you had an investment, or stake in the transaction.

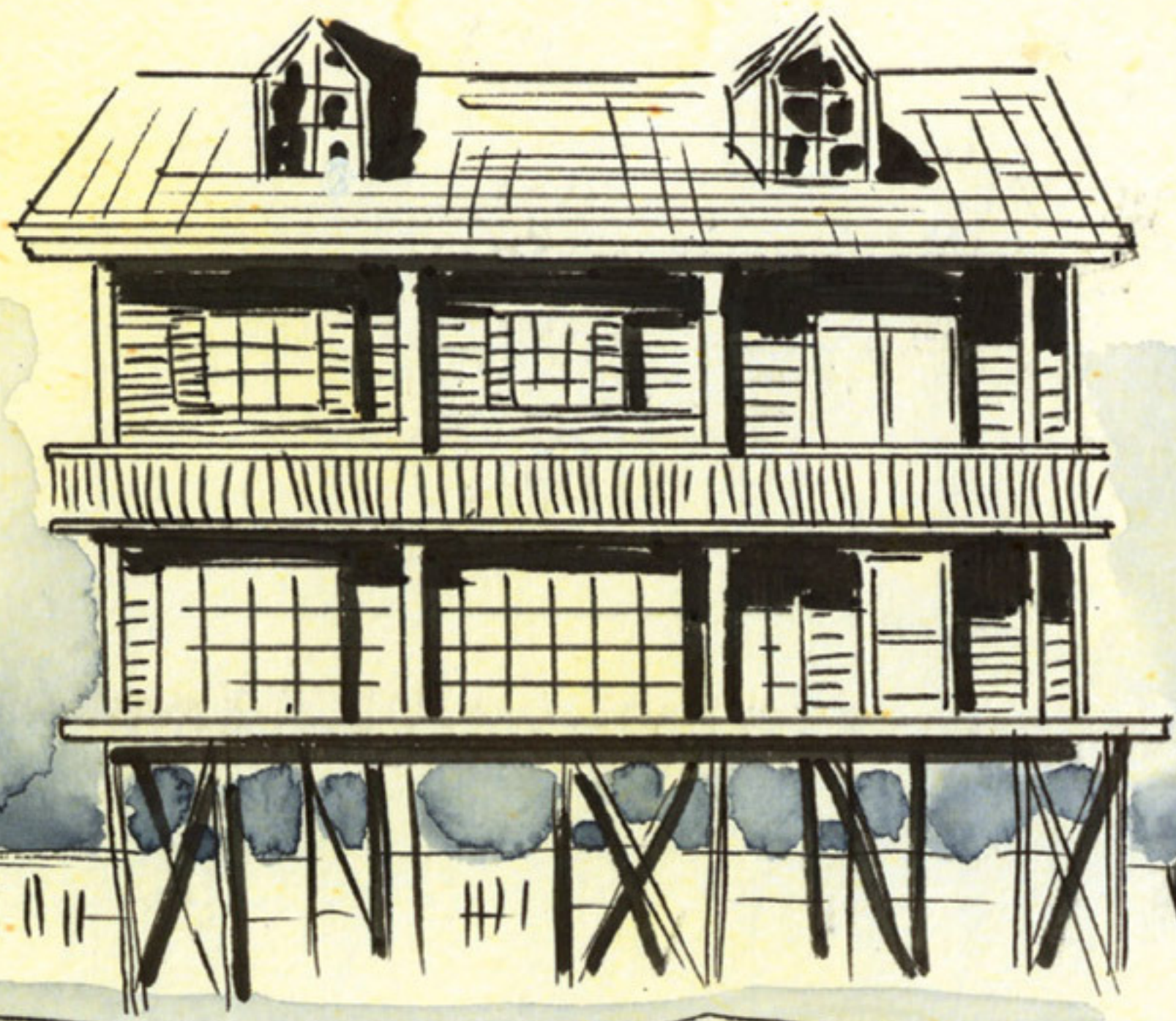
For example:
Head of table says: "A Touch of Class, Just a Touch Tho" a thoroughbred stud (registered closed book). Currently in Miami, Dream Breed Stables. Transport to Hawaii, port of Kawahee by April 19 of current year.

What the H.O.T. is asking is: Can you steal me a racehorse housed in Miami, and deliver it to Hawaii three days from now?

Or Head of table says: "Knockout Mouse" MUS Surditatem. Prevaris Lab. Salt Lake City. Corporate. Steal and destroy by below date.

Here the bread/steak is a laboratory animal being used in gene sequencing. H.O.T. needs it out and dead by tomorrow.





It was never something I set out to do, become a thief.

After my mother passed away, I finished high school and then went to community college near home to help take care of my father. I studied medicine. My mother's decline had been ugly, the way her body had loosened up part by part,

like a spring toy unlocking, all the while the baby trapped inside...Studying medicine felt right at first. I would help find a cure for what she had, too. I would push the thing back by a bit--an inch, maybe a fraction of an inch.

But by the second term, I was falling behind. I couldn't concentrate. Not on organic or bio. It all felt like studying maps and guides to a country I never wanted to visit, and little by little I started slipping away. I visited with my father, who'd moved to an apartment not far from our old house. We'd talk politics, he'd go on about the dismal slide of everything toward resignation, the lack of activism in the kids in his classes. I dated, had some girlfriends, but nothing ever took.

The black water was just always...there. A transparency. I'd be with someone I liked, really liked, sitting with them on the couch, watching some dumb show, and she'd put her head on my chest and I'd kiss the top of her hair and I'd feel good, but then it'd come over me, this chill, and I'd look down and not see the head of the girl I liked but a physical thing, hair and scalp and blood and bone and electricity--a collection of cells and mechanisms, which was what I was, too, a thing, ending at my nose, my feet, my fingertips. A shock from a socket could change me. A knife through my eye would change me. Something could already be malfunctioning. Something could be unlocking inside and then boom, down, any second now and my heart would race and I'd start to sweat and grind my teeth, and say to myself you are a whole, not parts, but parts is what I felt like, a tiny being driving some huge, failing machine of a body, staring through the portals of my eyes.

Some nights, I took to driving out to the houses I'd visited with my mother years before--the mansions on the water. A couple had been torn down and rebuilt, a few had been dragged even farther back from the shore. The beach had receded farther, and on certain evenings I could see what looked like the tops of two, maybe three train cars poking up through the surf. Now and then, I'd go into a house, walk around, open a fridge.

The egg house hadn't changed much. They'd added a pool in the basement, a narrow lane of water cut through marble, but overall, the house looked the same as it had years before. The Russian was still there, following his routine.

It was on my second or third visit I started taking things from the egg house.

I told myself I was taking them to remember happier times, as mementos, but really, even then I knew it was about something else.

At first I stole small objects.

A box of shells from the bathroom.

A blown glass tumbler from the bar cart.

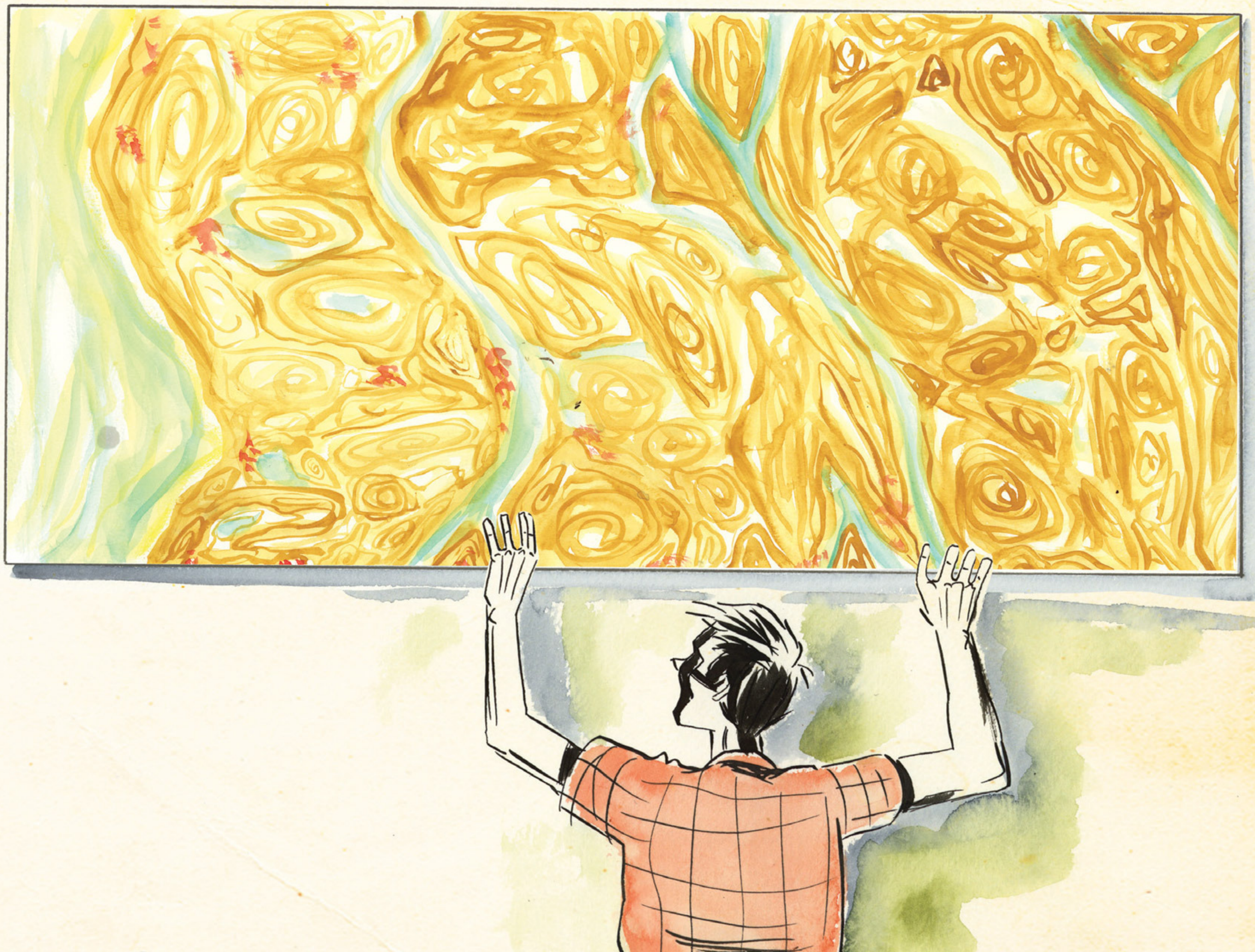
It took me a while to get up the courage to steal THE LAND OF MILK OF AND HONEY.

I knew I could likely just take it and run, let the alarm go off behind me (if there was an alarm at all), but that wasn't what I wanted. My idea was to create a replica of the piece and switch it out. As I said, though, the work wasn't really a painting so much as a sculptural diorama, so the challenge was reproducing it. I researched 3D printing and found that, if I scanned the dimensions of the canvas, I could create a mold of its general topography--not perfect, but still--and print a copy out of a wood polymer filament. From there, I could hire a student from the graduate art department to create the right epoxy, paint the mold in, grind, and so on. In hindsight, all this seems insanely clumsy and sloppy. Had I known then how easy it was to replicate paint hues--how even complicated or unevenly mixed colors can be mirrored perfectly by the same basic programs used in home improvement stores, and brushstrokes can literally be "written" on to a canvas by simple software and an operating brush--I would have done it myself, but like I said, I was new to it all.

By October I had a working replica of the piece and was ready to try for the original. I was twenty-two years old and, looking back, I should have been nervous, like I had been with the Quad so many years earlier, but I simply wasn't. That first time, I'd been terrified, I was sweating, my heart was pounding hard enough that my pulse actually hurt, the blood throbbing in my hands, my feet. This time, I was nervous, but above all, I was just curious to see if I could pull it off.

I drove out to the house with my replica wrapped in bubble tape and walked in through the same glass doors my mother and I always used. By now I'd learned that the art in this room was not alarmed after all, and I removed THE LAND OF MILK AND HONEY without incident.

I was just hanging my replica on the wall when the Russian walked in.



In all the time I'd been to this house, he had never, ever entered. But now here he was.

He'd followed me in through the glass doors and was standing there in the midday sun in his fur hat. He was leaning on a cane, something I'd never seen him do, and he was breathing hard, like he'd hurried here. I had the strange feeling he'd been waiting for this moment for a long time.

I looked down at the painting, the real one, THE LAND OF MILK AND HONEY. I went to pick it up but the Russian stopped me.

"The real one," he said, pointing to the replica of the painting. "You leave it and get out."

I tried to explain. "I'm sorry, the real one is--"

But the Russian hissed and jabbed the cane at the air between us, as though stabbing my words dead, mid-flight. I noticed for the first time that his fur hat had a small brim in front, like a visor. He was still breathing hard.

"Leave that one where you found it," he said, meaning, leave the fake painting in place of the real one, "and just...leave."

I nodded, grateful that he was letting me go.

I took the real painting from the ground and left. As I hurried across the lawn, a thrill rose in me. I'd done it. By luck, sure, but I'd done it anyway! And right there, crossing the grass to my car, it suddenly hit me, why I'd done what I'd done.

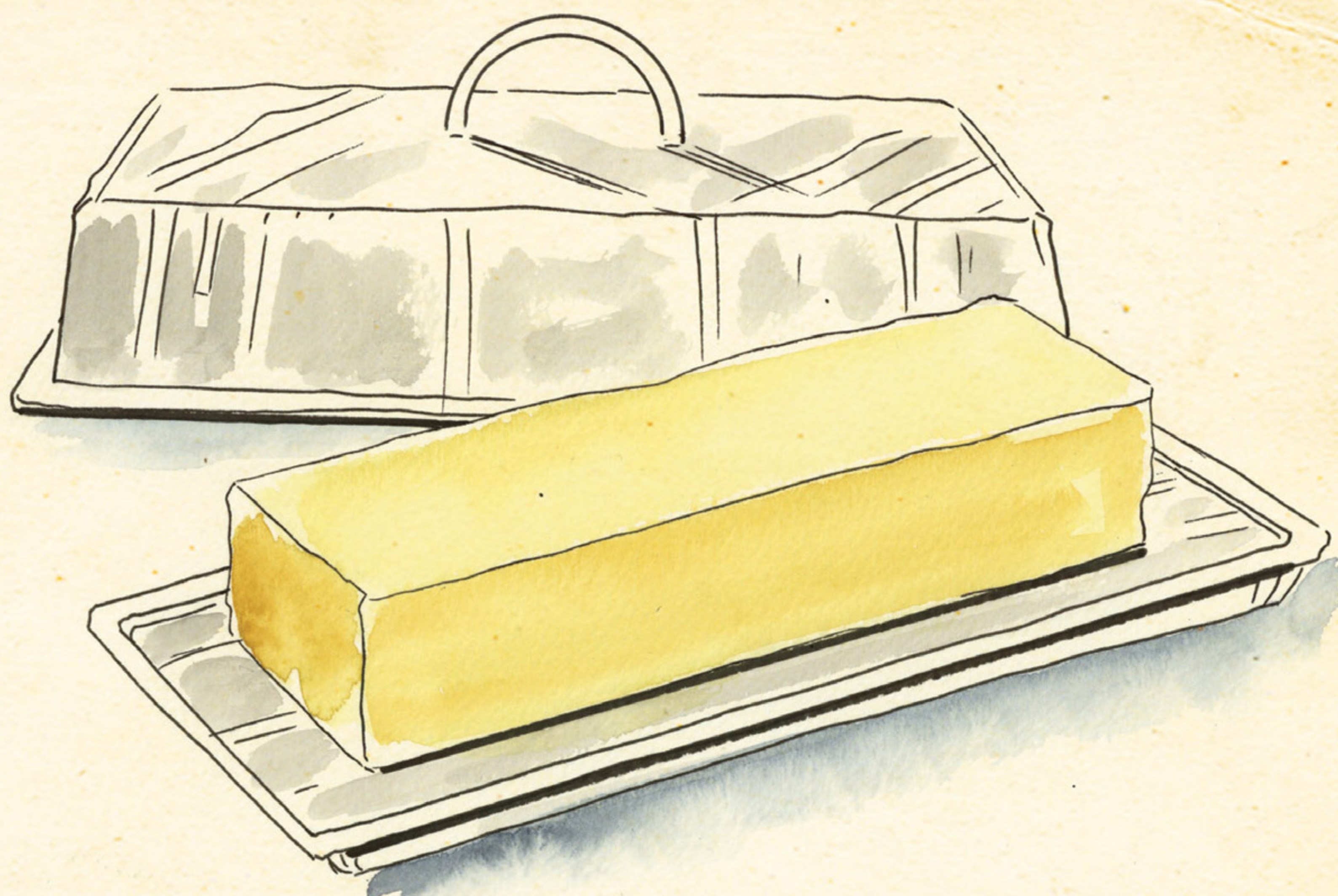
I understood in that moment that I hadn't stolen the painting for memories, or out of nostalgia. That was all an excuse. I had stolen it for the deep, specific thrill of removing the thing from the intractable, steel system that contained it--not just contained it, but imbued it with meaning, gave it its role in the world. I was removing it from the rules of its life, like taking a word out of a paragraph without anyone knowing, replacing it with a stand-in. The real thing had escaped, had been rescued, and no one knew. I saw now that even the Quad I'd taken--even that--hadn't been about the Quad itself. It had been about secretly recording my life; the theft was about squirreling away precious moments, hiding them from the slide of time, or slide of memory, keeping them safe under my bed from the math of the universe.

Theft was a form of magic--I saw that now; a theft was a feat that eluded common perception and, more than this, hinted at the fallibility of the physical bonds of this world. We're escapists, in essence, thieves and magicians, testing for holes in the system. We look for ways out of boxes, locked, sinking, air-tight boxes headed deeper into the dark. Perhaps it's no surprise then that so many magicians throughout history had obsessions with death. Houdini swore to be the first to give evidence of life after death. David Copperfield purchased an island in the Archipelagos that's supposedly home to a fountain of youth for vegetation. Put a dead leaf in, and it comes back to life.



From there, stealing just became something I did for myself.

I ended up learning about moving the art I stole (at first, it was all art) from the graduate student who'd helped me replicate THE LAND OF MILK AND HONEY. She told me about the right places to go, the sites and rooms where people trafficked in all things stolen. And when I say all things, I mean all things.



See, people always assume what the head of table most often challenged thieves like me to steal were priceless works of art. Some painting under heavy guard in a museum in a remote corner of the world. But, in fact, these sorts of prizes were never that hard to get. Look at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum theft, or the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris heist. Really, all you had to do was pay some guard fifty, maybe fifty-five thousand Euros AT MOST, and they'd let you know which shipping facility was holding the work--and there were only three main ones, two in Switzerland; they'd tell how to disable the tag, tear the cornia, all of it. For under a million, you could get a hired hand to cut paintings from their frames with a thumb razor, roll them up, and drive away. If the hand was caught but didn't have the painting anymore because he'd burned it (not really), he'd get seven years. Maybe ten. That meant five hundred thousand at most for a ten-million-dollar painting.

The true challenges were tougher. The ones for real thieves, thieves in the rooms I ended up frequenting.

They went more like this:

Head of table says: a pound of butter from A Glace in Callais. Butter there is made with hyper-fresh milk. Composition of butter changes within hours. Challenge is to preserve butter (no freezing, as this will expand moisture in the cellular channels and compromises integrity) and deliver to Miami as-is.

And everyone at the table had a certain amount of time to pose his or her solution to that problem. You used what you could to learn about the system that pound of butter belonged to. Who in the restaurant could help you get that butter fresh--the melatonin levels in the milk were what make it precious. Who could get a vehicle with a vacuum chamber inside. Who could ship or fly that vacuum chamber across the Pacific in the amount of time allotted, and so on.

You did it by learning about each and every link in the process. It was a living, breathing mechanical engineering project done in your own home.

After a while, you start bumping into the same people in these rooms. It's a small set, to say the least, and, soon enough, you seek each other out. You look to find rooms set up by the same head of table; he or she looks for you.

My life went on, too. I tried going back to school, and I finished, though it took time. I cared for my father, who passed from a stroke while I was in my thirties. I started working for a former student of his, who sold real estate, then moved into modular homes.

All the while, I kept up in the thieving world, sometimes as bread, sometimes as steak. I never met the people I trafficked with, neither the heads nor the thieves, but I became well known in that world. Sometimes I worked with other thieves I knew. Runnid or Loki. The head of table I worked with most called himself R'overnight.

Like with most heads of table, R'overnight's marks were usually utilitarian things--a mini-server from a small blood bank in Sao Paolo, a sample of an experimental paint-on solar panel from a facility in Wisconsin. But he also made an effort to get to know us a bit, the men and women on the other side of the calculus.

Maybe it was the way he liked to ask us about our lives while setting a mark. He'd ask out of nowhere, too. White words on a black screen at night. He always started with the same phrase: "Forgive me for asking, but..."

As I said, the item I was after for R'overnight the morning I learned of the cure for death was a memento from a famous musician's collection. It was a suit this singer's wife had made him. A spangly thing with arrows and sequins. It had never been worn, but had stayed in his private holdings, never been donated. Apparently it was something special.

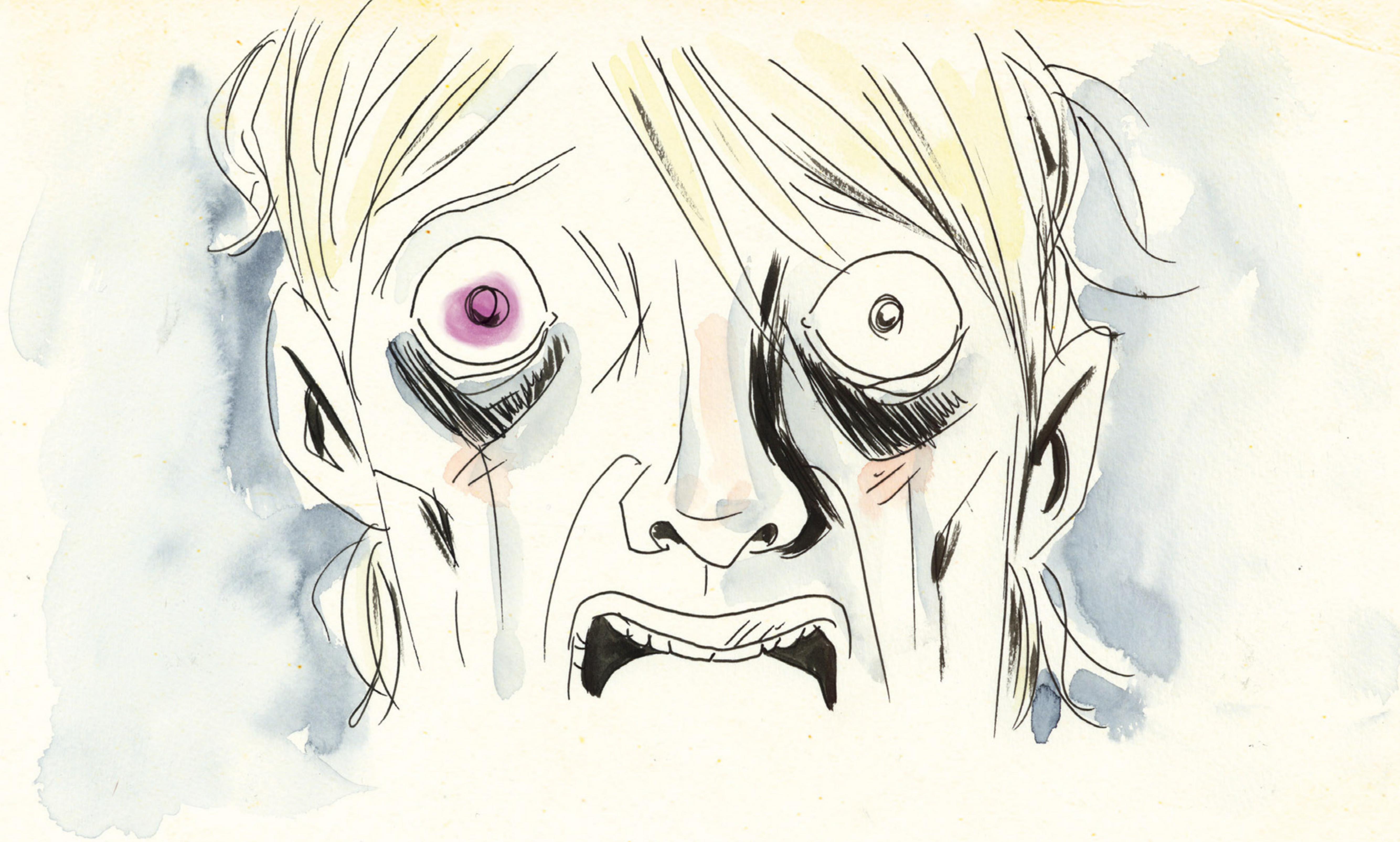
"Forgive me for asking, but are you married?"

"Forgive me for asking, Capcook, but how are things?"

Sometimes I'd chat with him in one room, then, when it folded, in the next room, a conversation appearing and disappearing.

I talked to him openly. Once I even told him about my mother, about the last moments of her life...





There was a moment, I typed, just before she died, with my brother inside her, when she...forgot who she was for moment. Where she was. Her mind was going, and she had this conversation with me where she thought I was my brother, the baby inside her, all grown up. She was talking to me like I was him. I was Nathan--that was the name they'd chosen--Nathan about to go to college. She mentioned me, too, Jonah, and how I'd married, had children. She talked to me like we were twenty years down the line, and she was so happy. I played along, acting the part. But then, suddenly, midsentence, her mind snapped back and she realized what was happening. It all rushed back to her. She was dying. Nathan would die. We were in a different life. And the look on her face, the terror...

I think about this now, how maybe my closest friend back then was a head of table, someone asking me to prep steaks, prep bread, a ghost I'd never meet, called R'overnight, and it makes me angry at my younger self.

I want to tell that young man to turn back, that only horrors lie ahead.

You would never guess the things missing from the world, by the way. Shakespeare's skull was stolen long ago. Look it up. It's true. They used ground-penetrating radar to check.

The actual letters of Benjamin Franklin and the key used in the lightning storm are gone. All replaced with stand-ins.

Not to mention three astronaut helmets from a sea and air museum in Texas.

"I wonder where they are," said Bud now, looking out over the parking lot for his friends.

"None of us are ever late, except when coming back to Earth, of course," he said. It was an old joke he used, but he said it mirthlessly now. He looked at his phone--a flip-phone with a brown, insectoidile shell.

"I'm sure they'll be along," said Bud.

I decided to give him his helmet now.

I got up to do it when the phone rang.

A private number.

My call. R'overnight.

I answered.

"Jonah?" Right away I recognized the voice as Brooke's. She was front of office at the company where I worked.

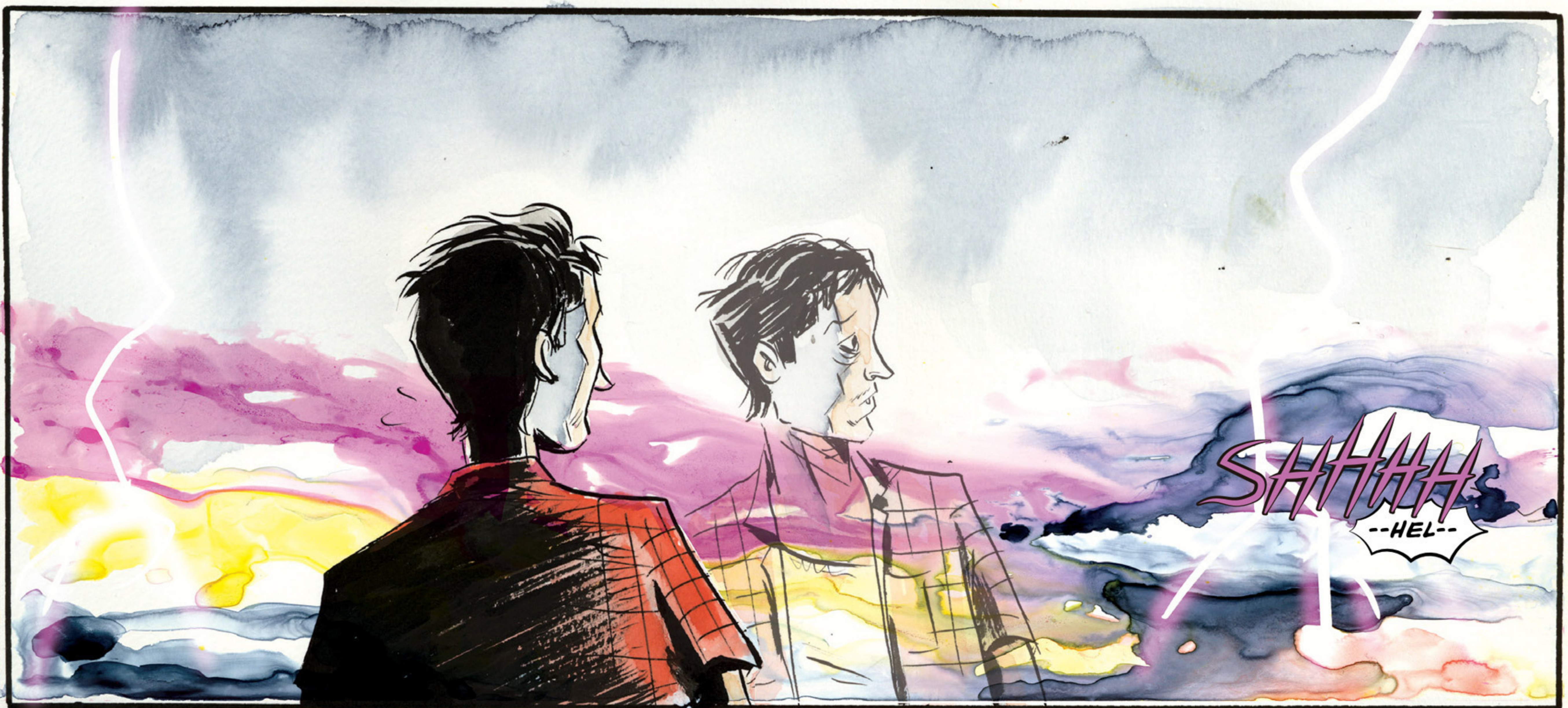
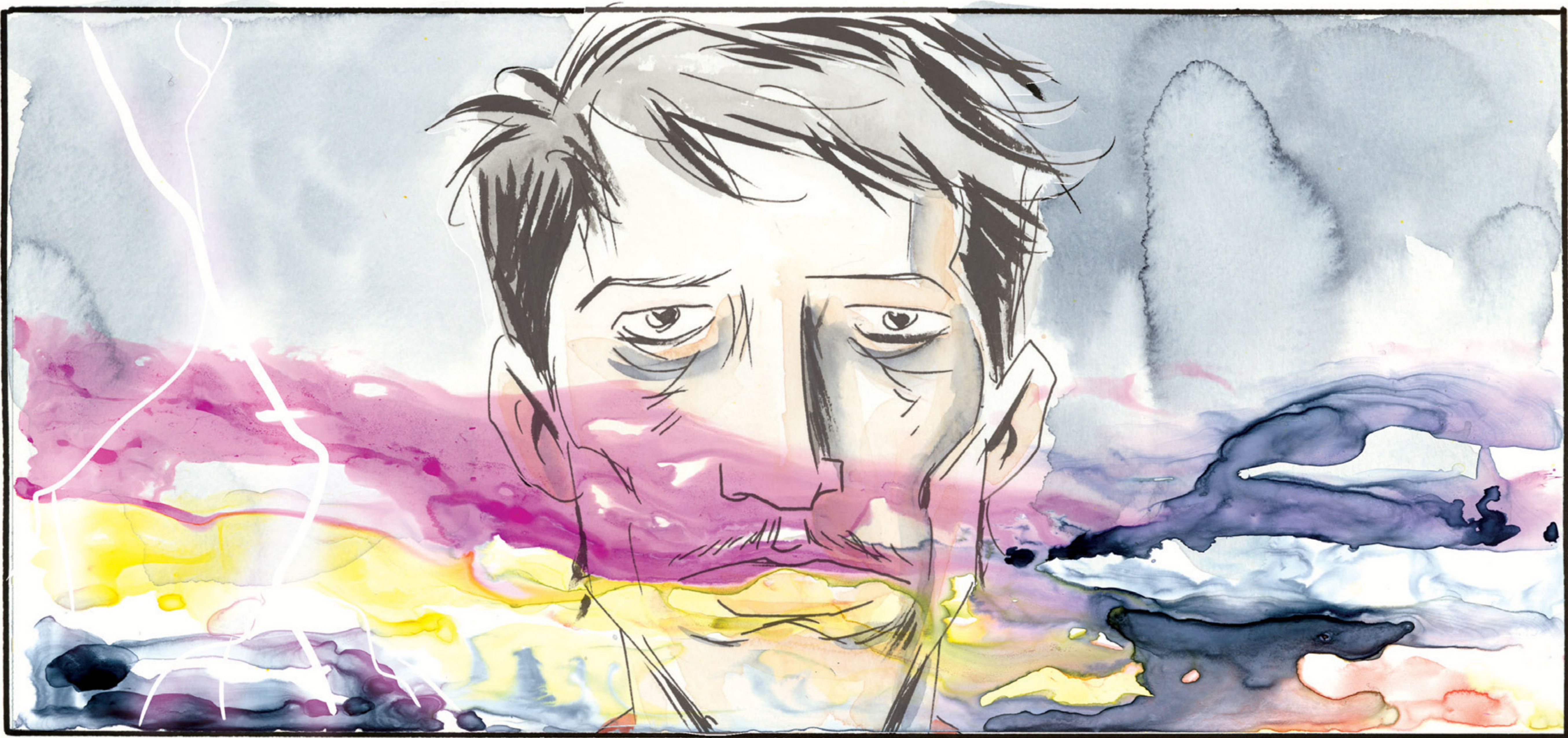
I felt a pang of worry over the theft, but pushed it away. I asked Brooke what the issue was. It was the weekend, and I had no obligation to the office.

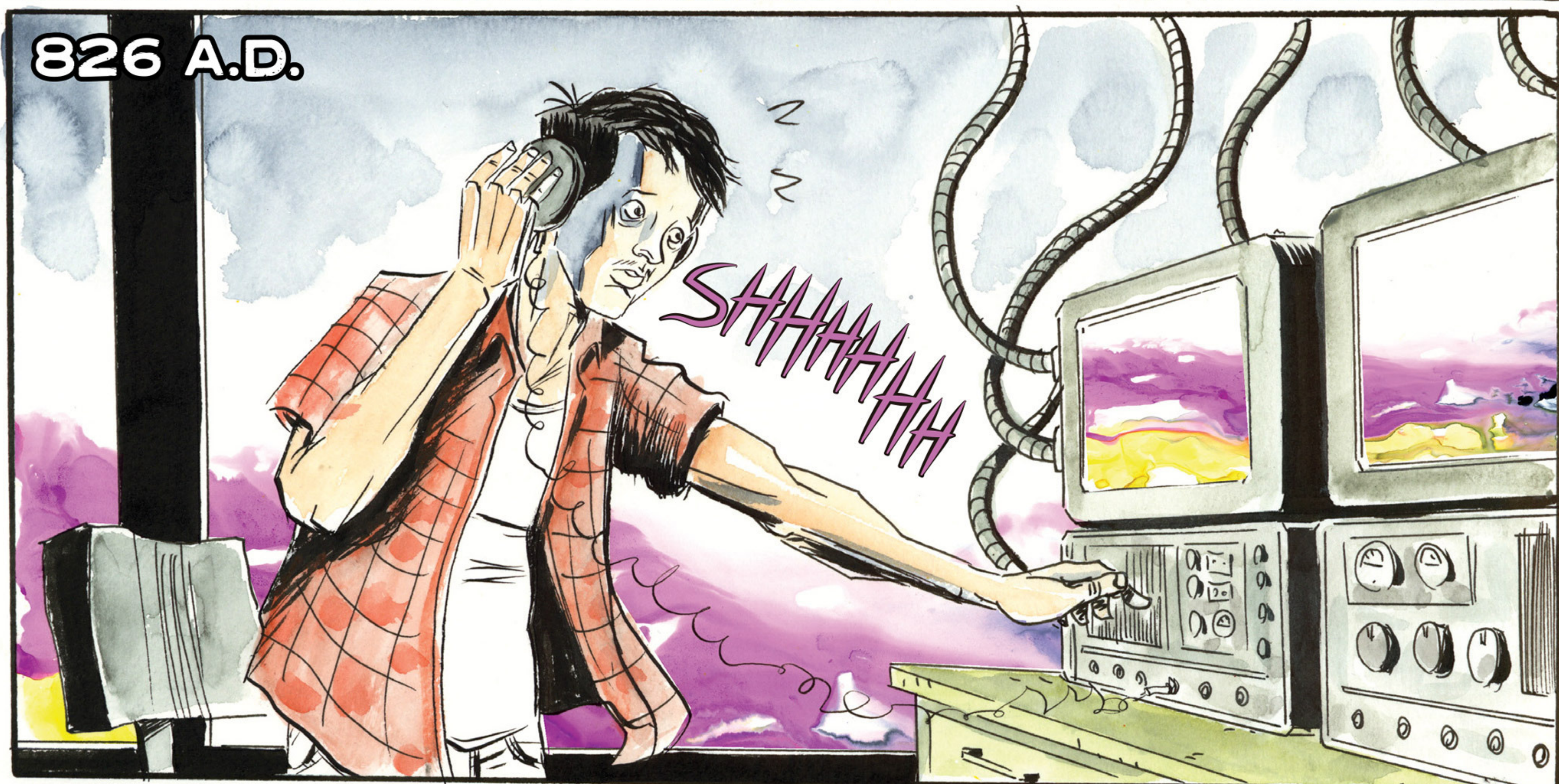
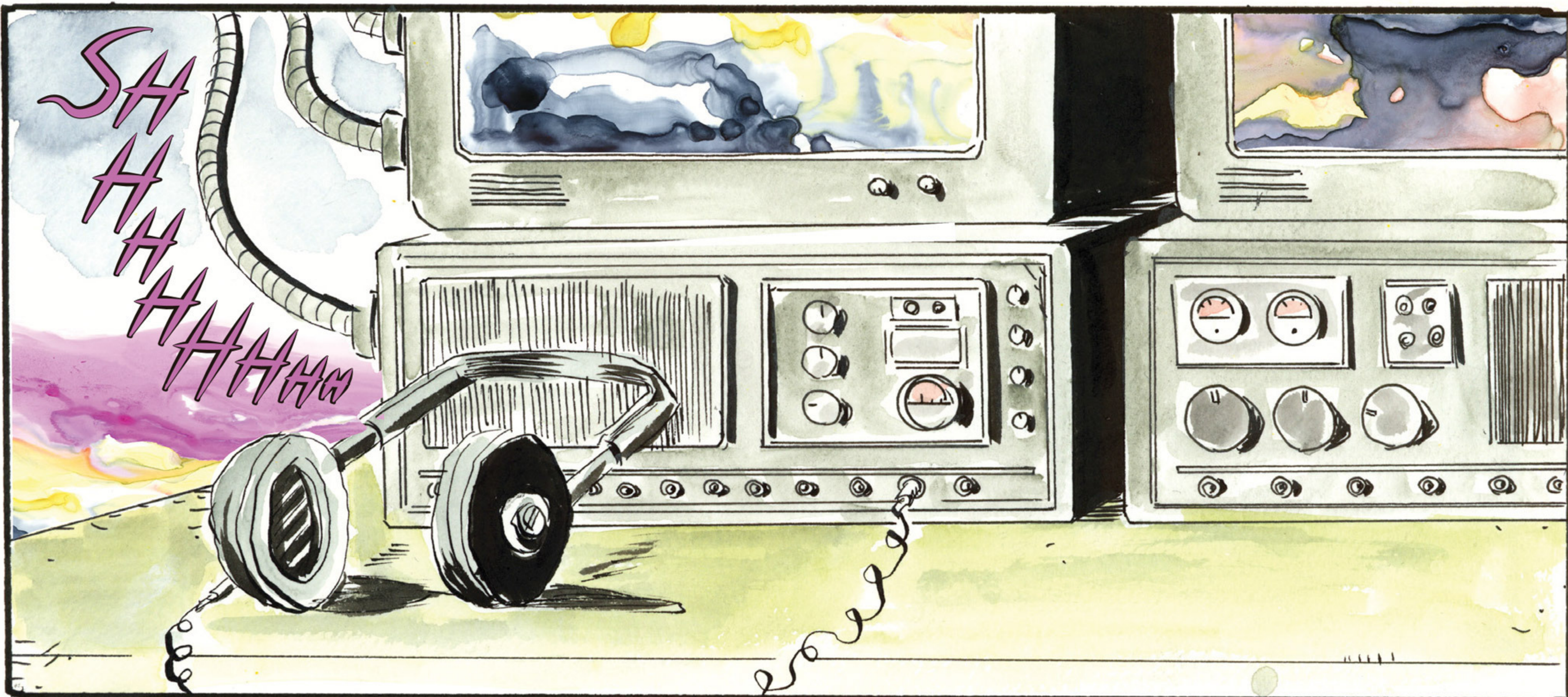
"Someone's here to see you."

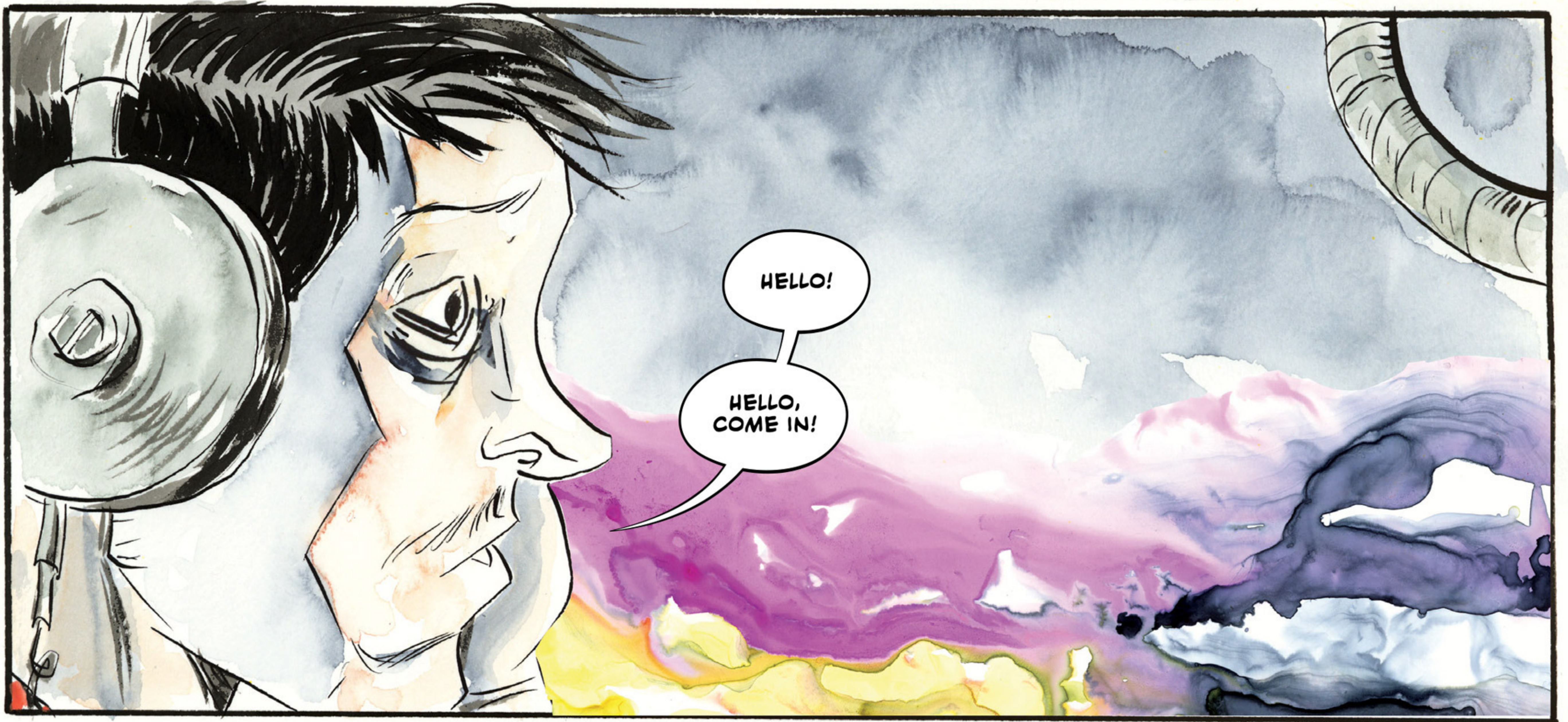
"It's Saturday, and--"

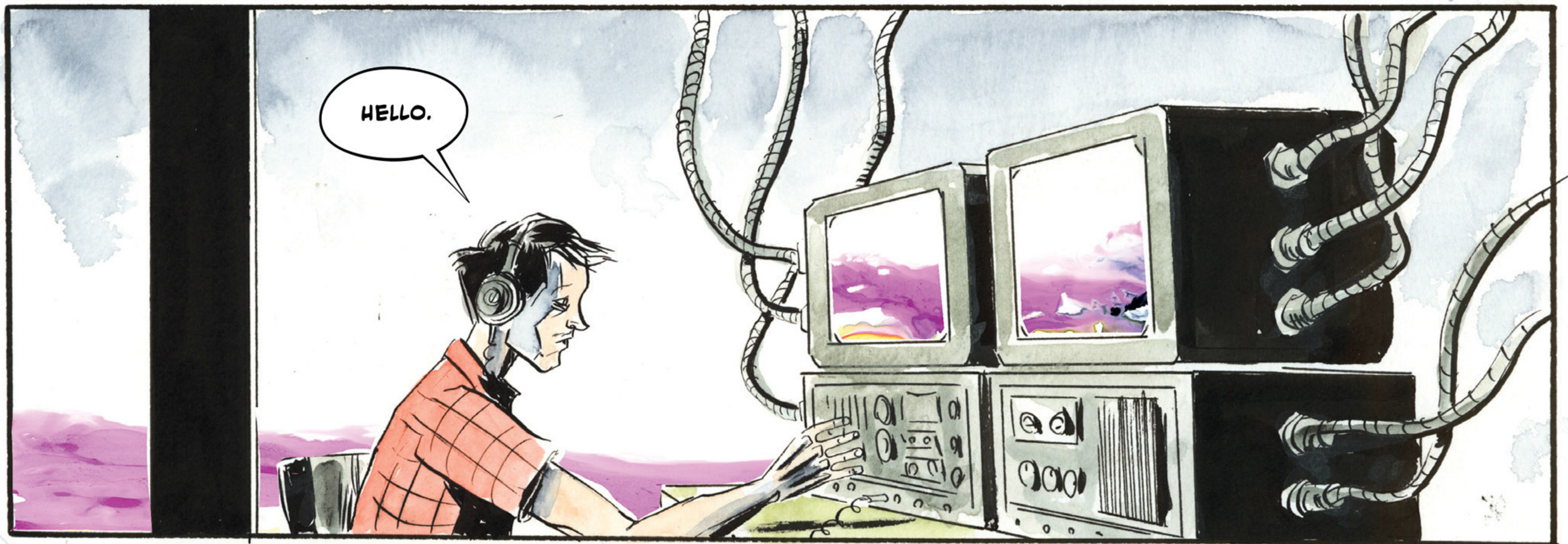
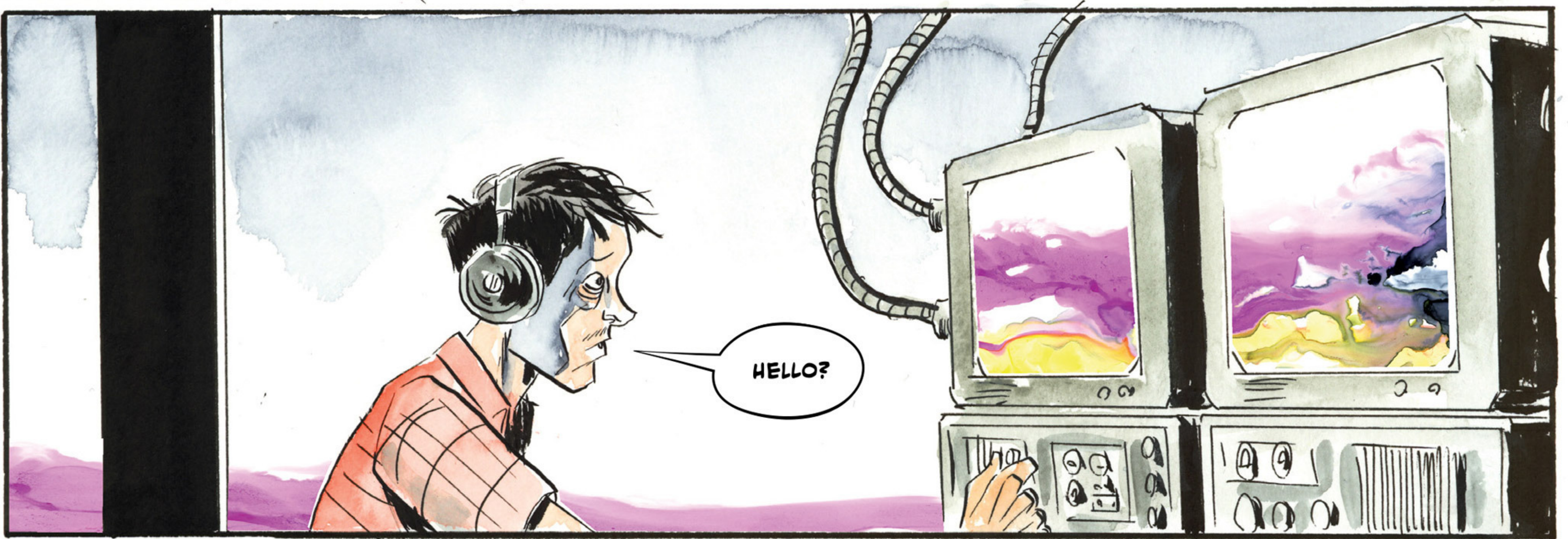
"Just come down, Jonah," she said. "You're going to want to take this call."

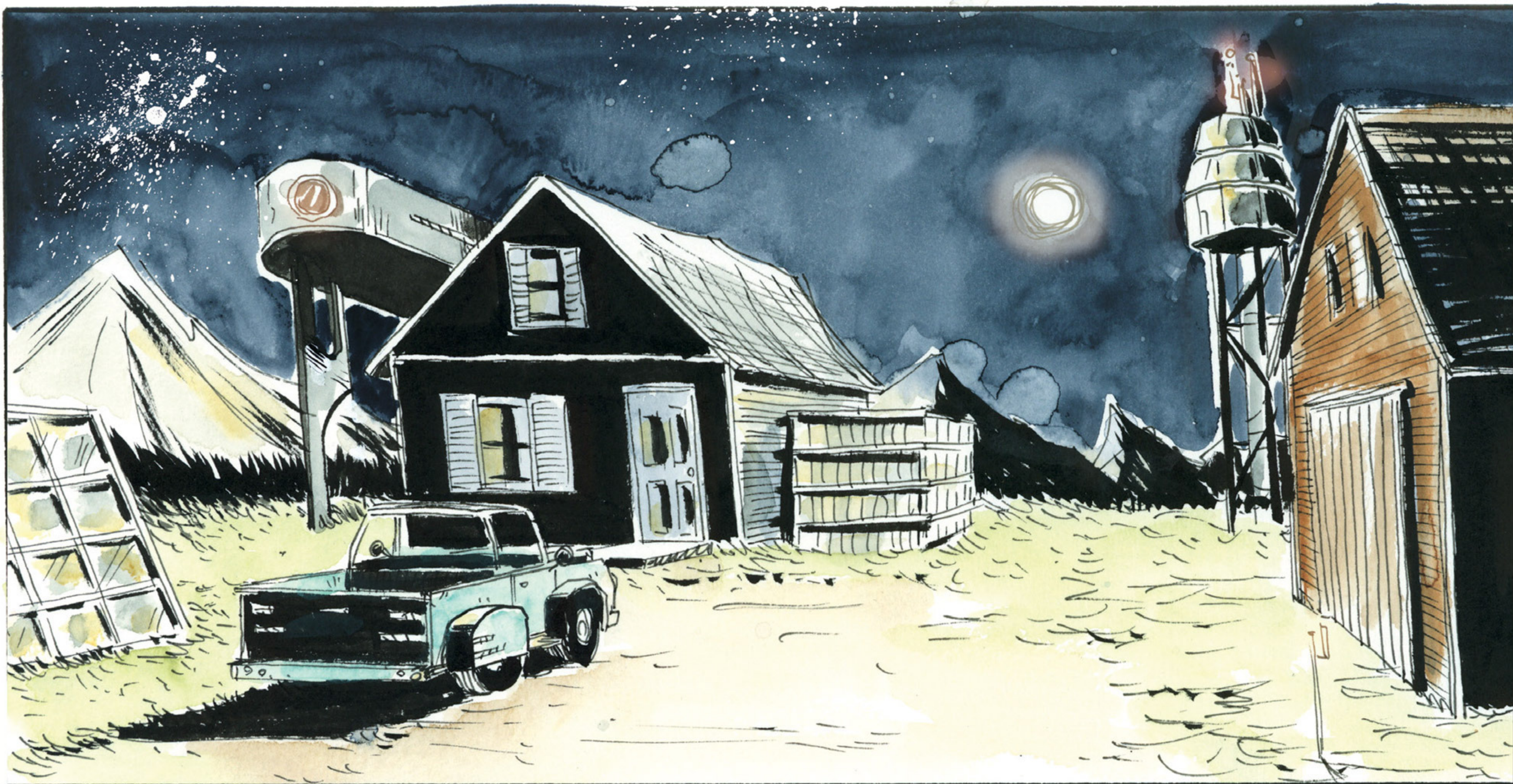


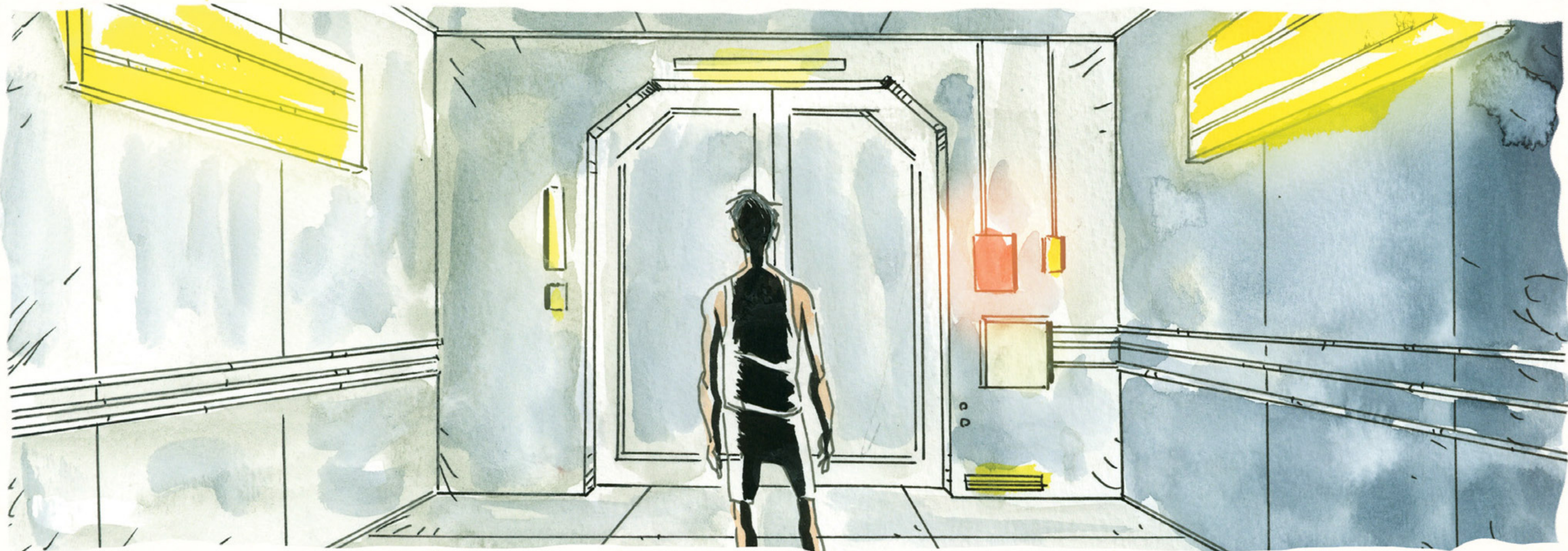


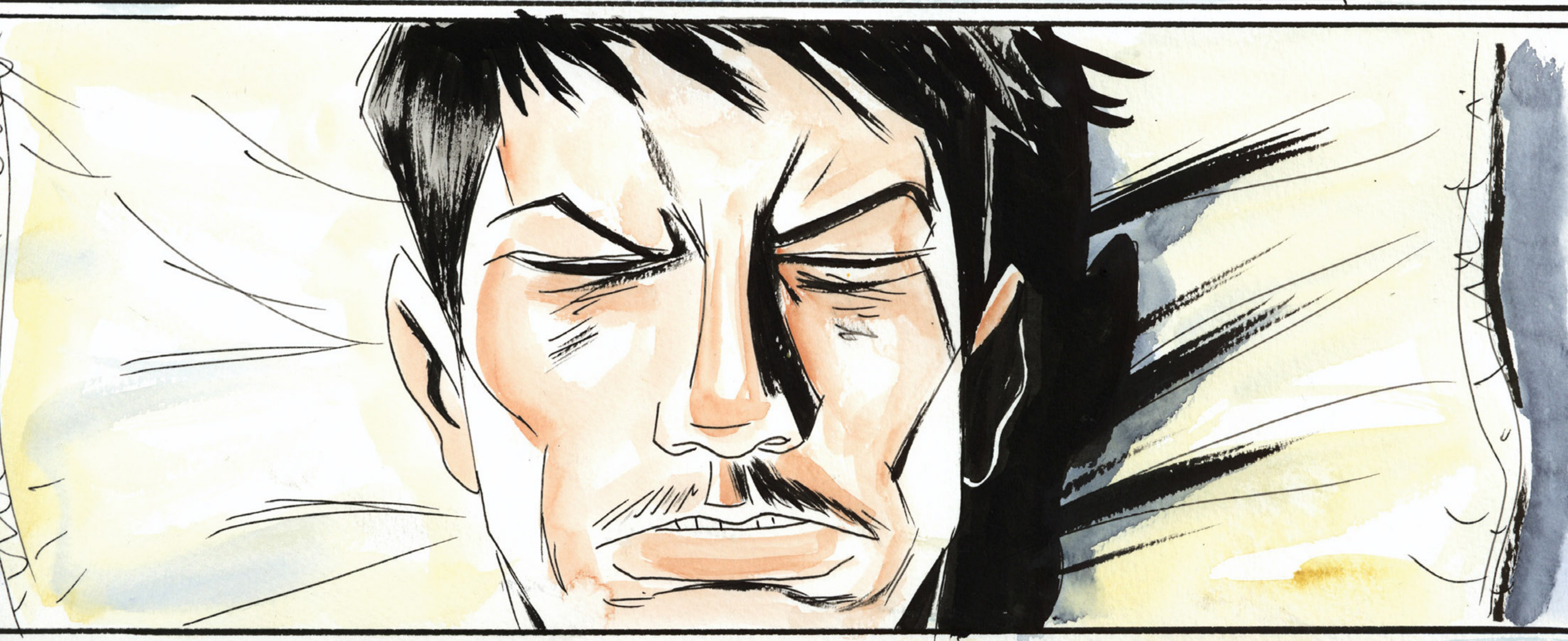
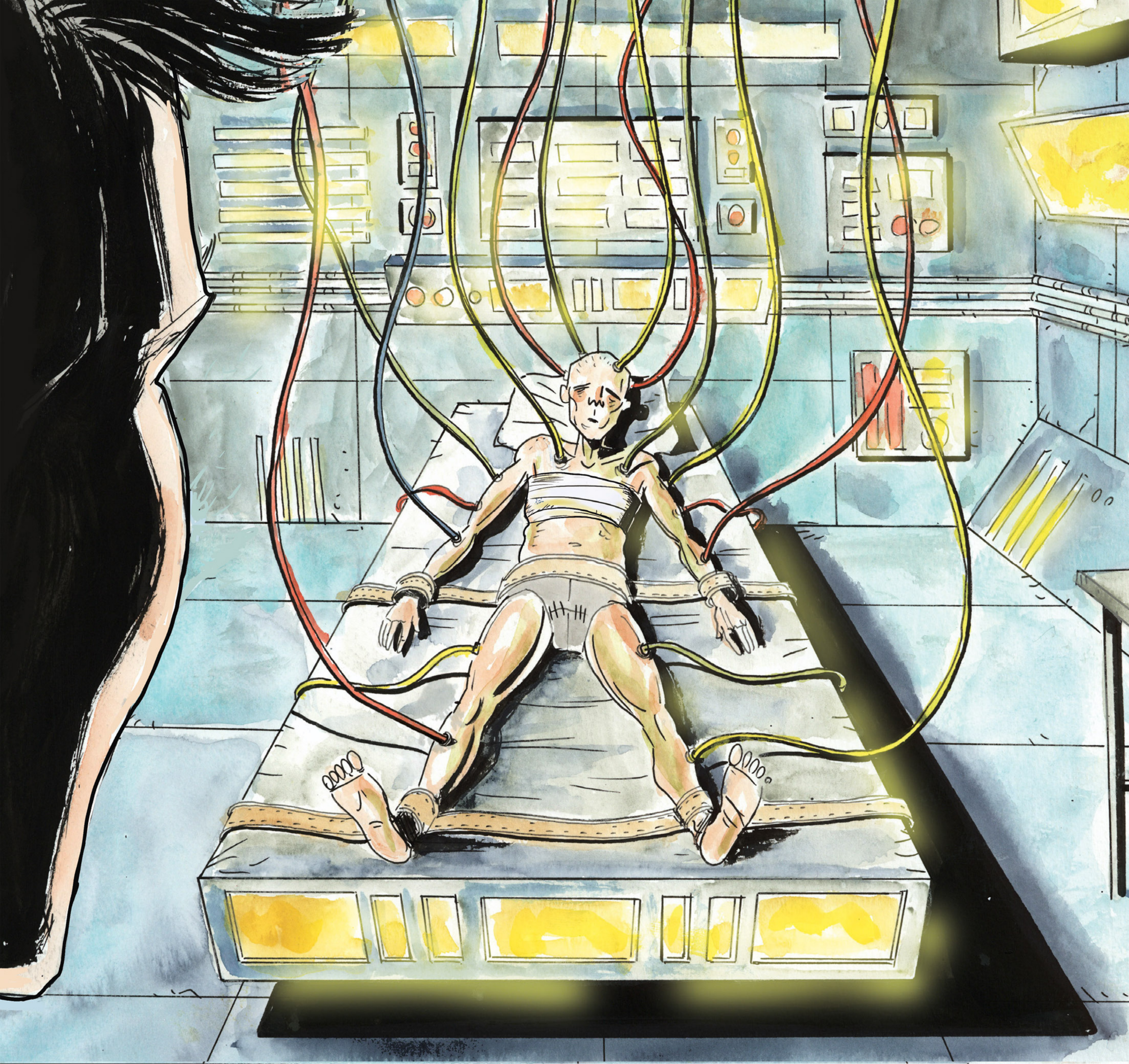






















YOU WERE
TELLING ME THE
TRUTH, RIGHT? WHEN
YOU SAID YOU NEVER
HEARD ANYTHING
FROM BELOW?
THAT YOU
NEVER--



YOU HEARD
SOMETHING?



YES...
I MEAN, I
THOUGHT SO.
IT SOUNDED
LIKE A...
CHILD.

I DON'T
KNOW.

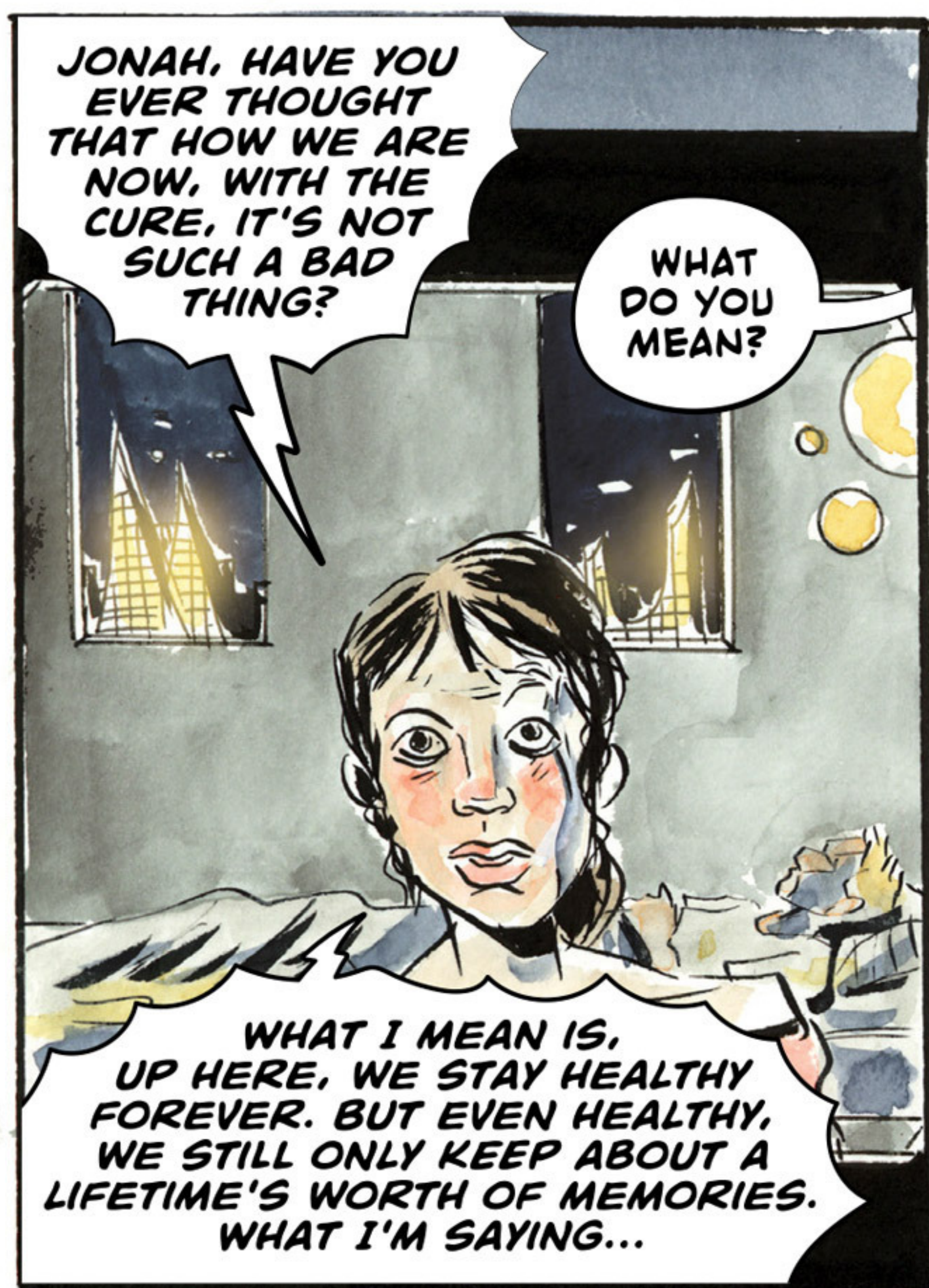
JONAH, YOUR
MIND PLAYS TRICKS
ON YOU UP THERE. THE
DYING KILLED EVERYONE.
EVERYTHING. SPREAD
ACROSS THE WORLD.
IT'S STILL DOWN
THERE.

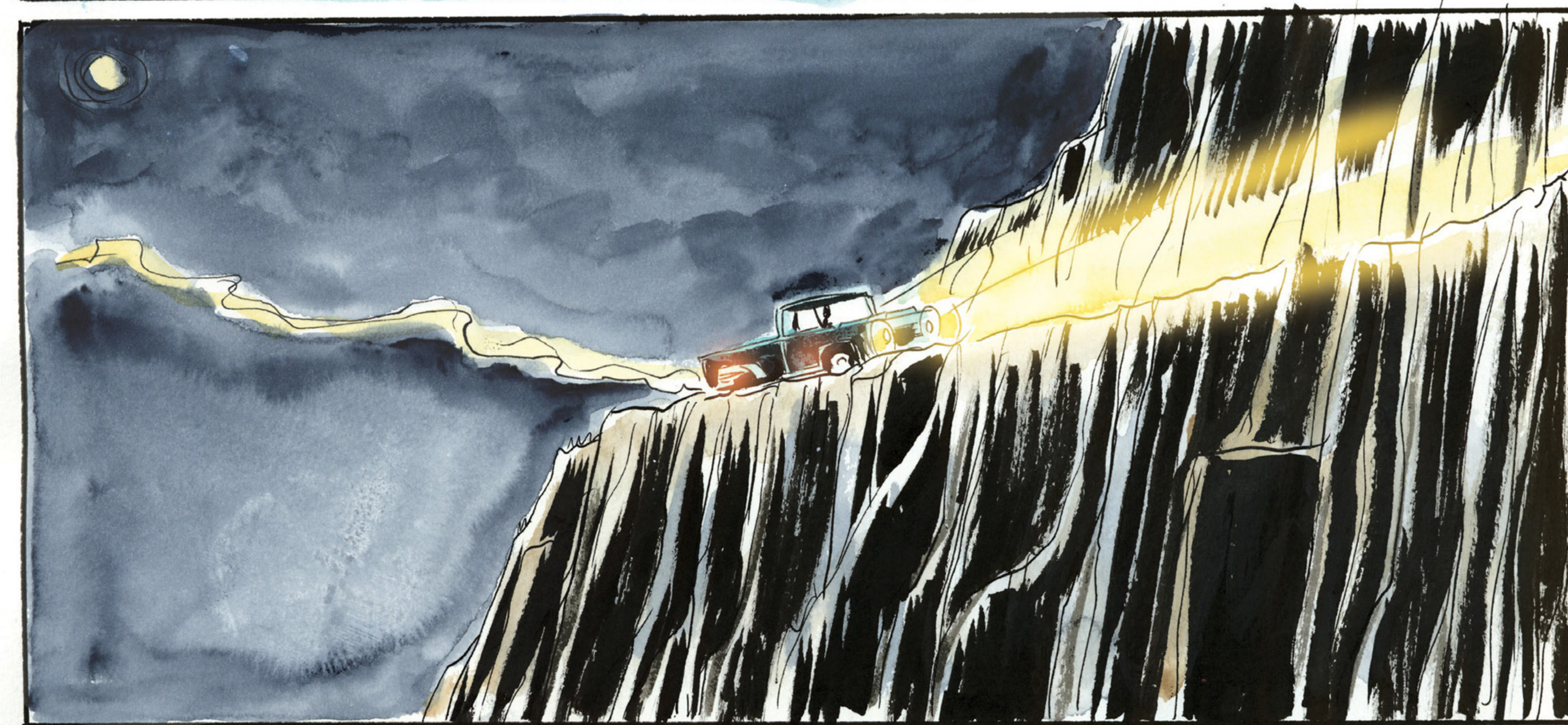
IT'S
IMPOSSIBLE
THAT NO ONE
SURVIVED.
THERE HAS
TO BE--

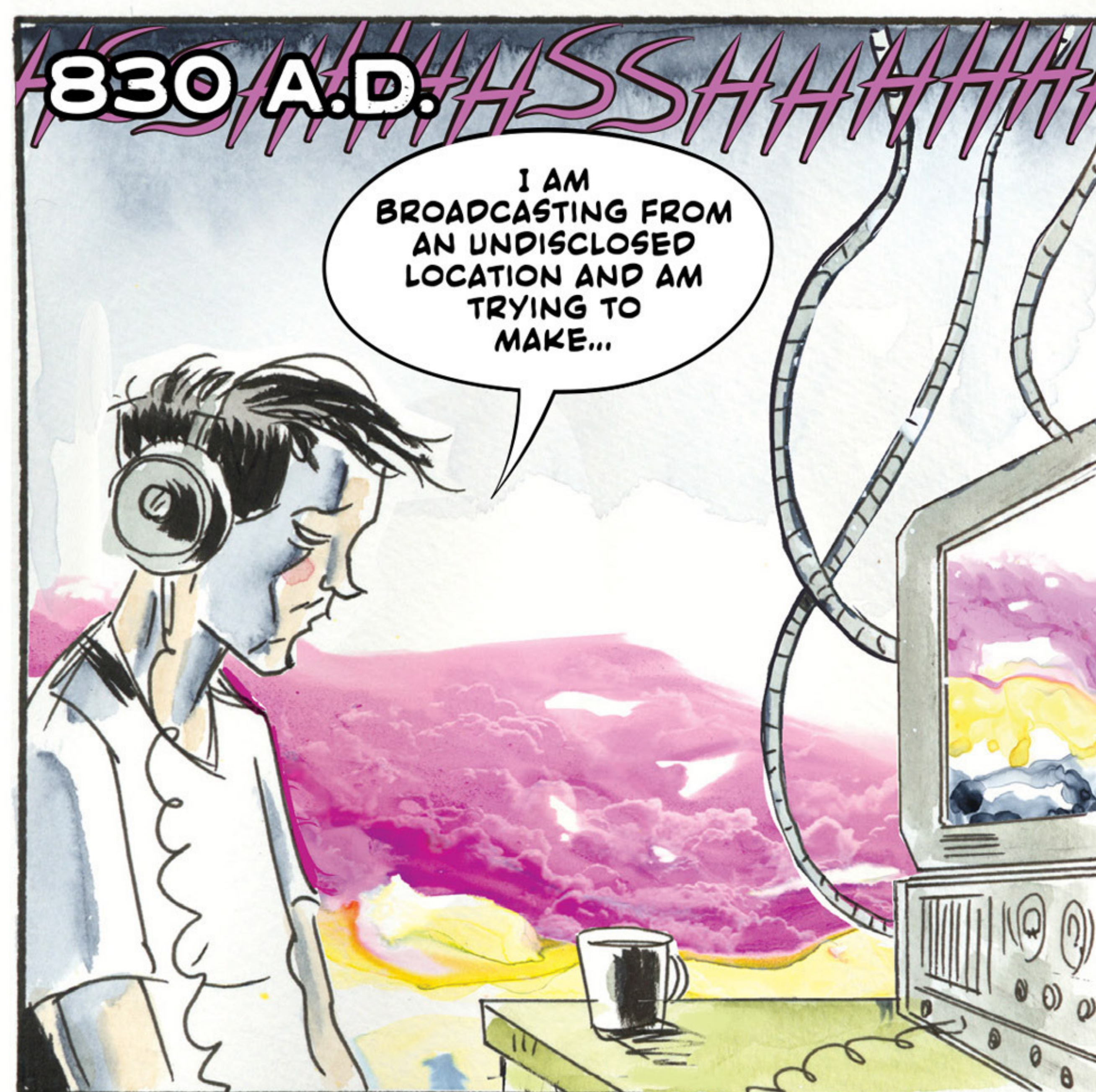
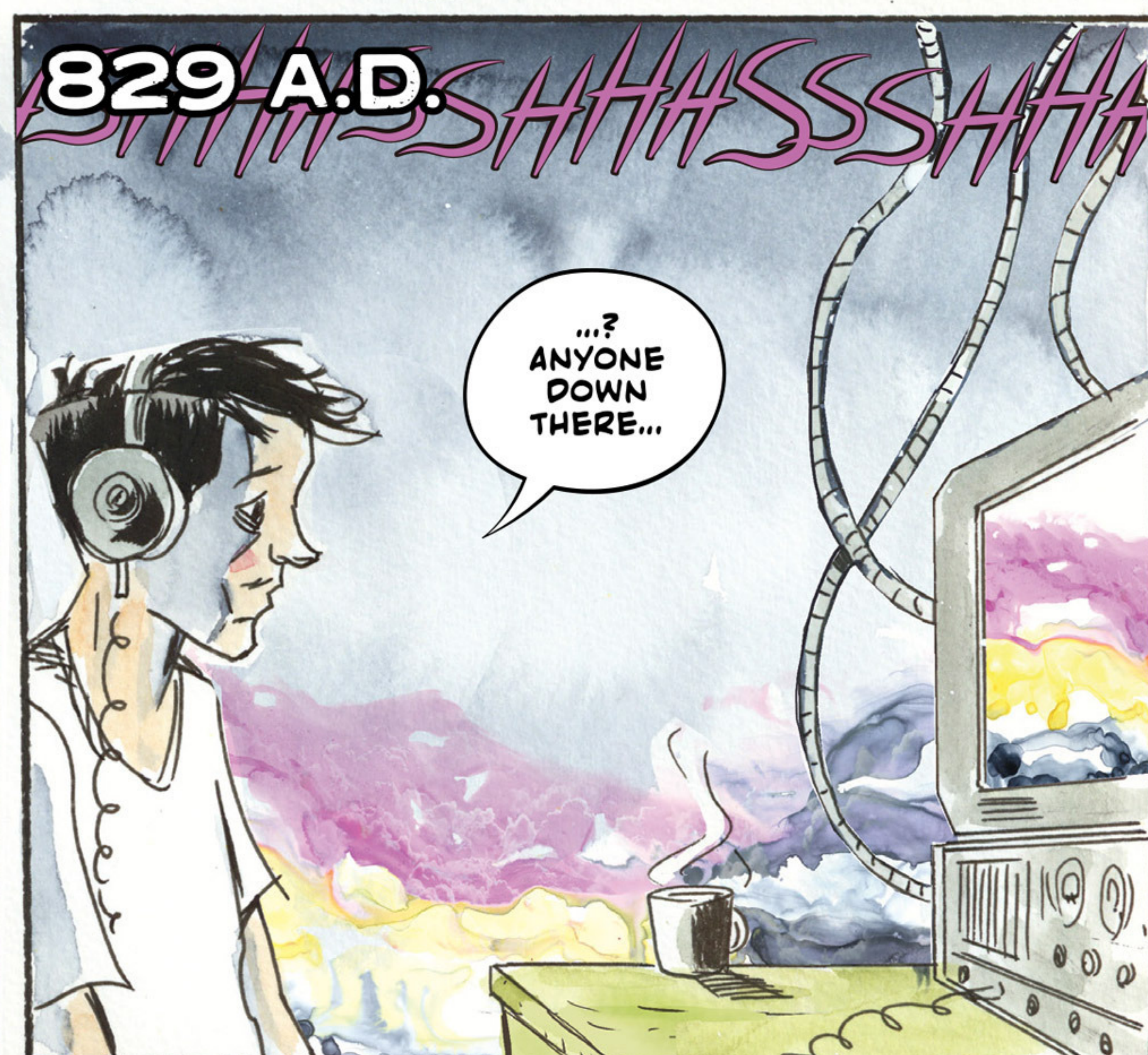
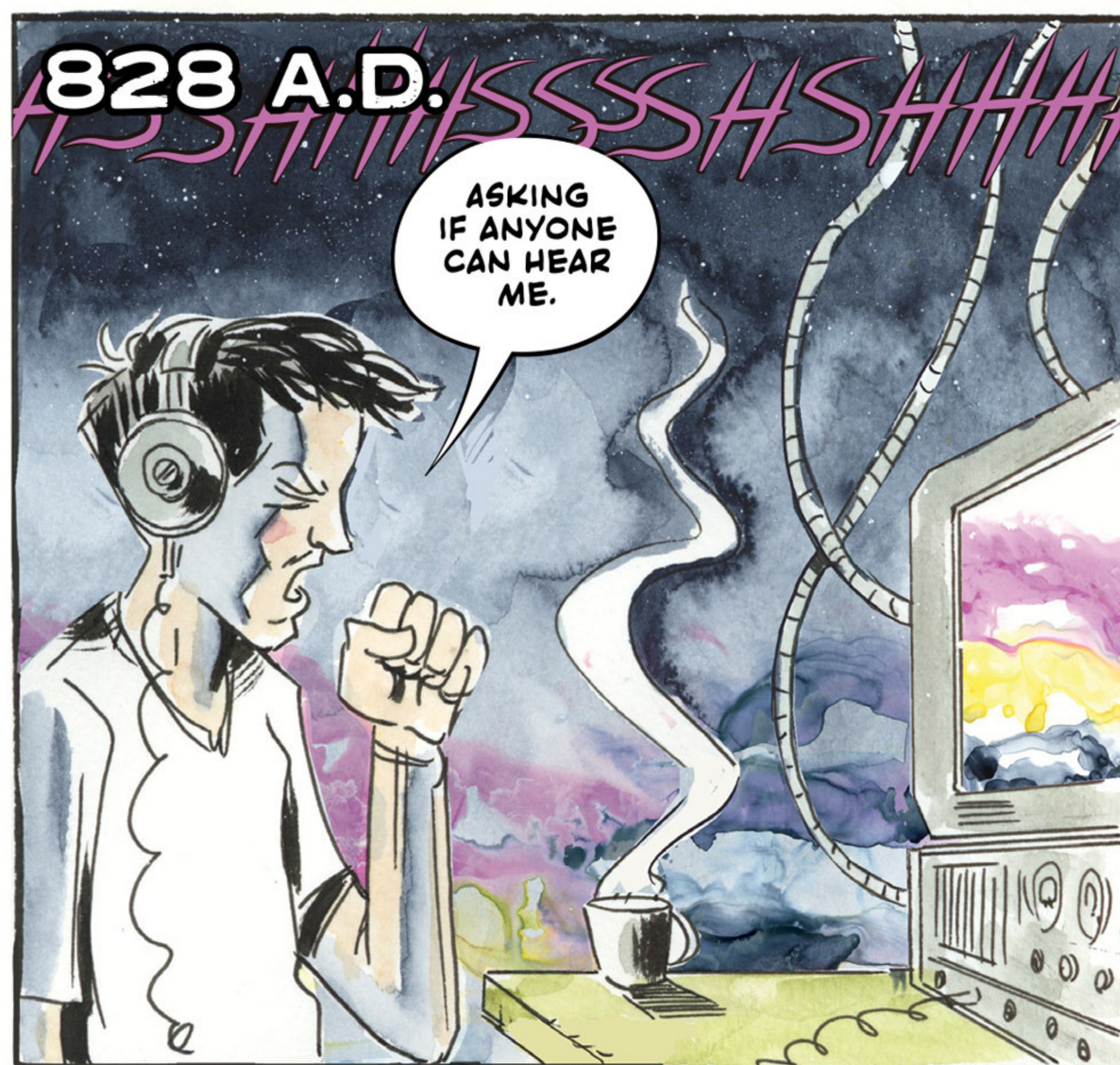
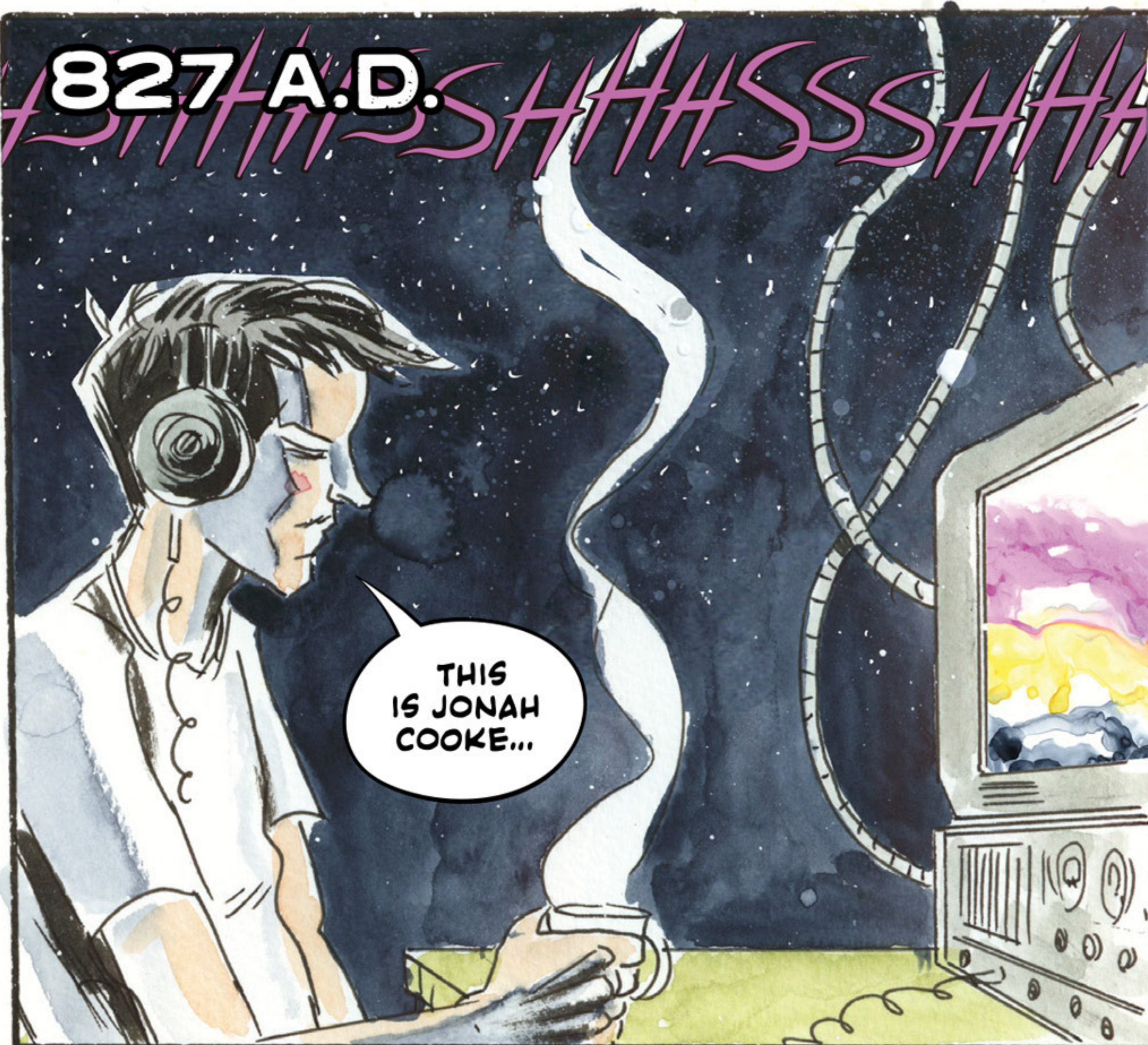


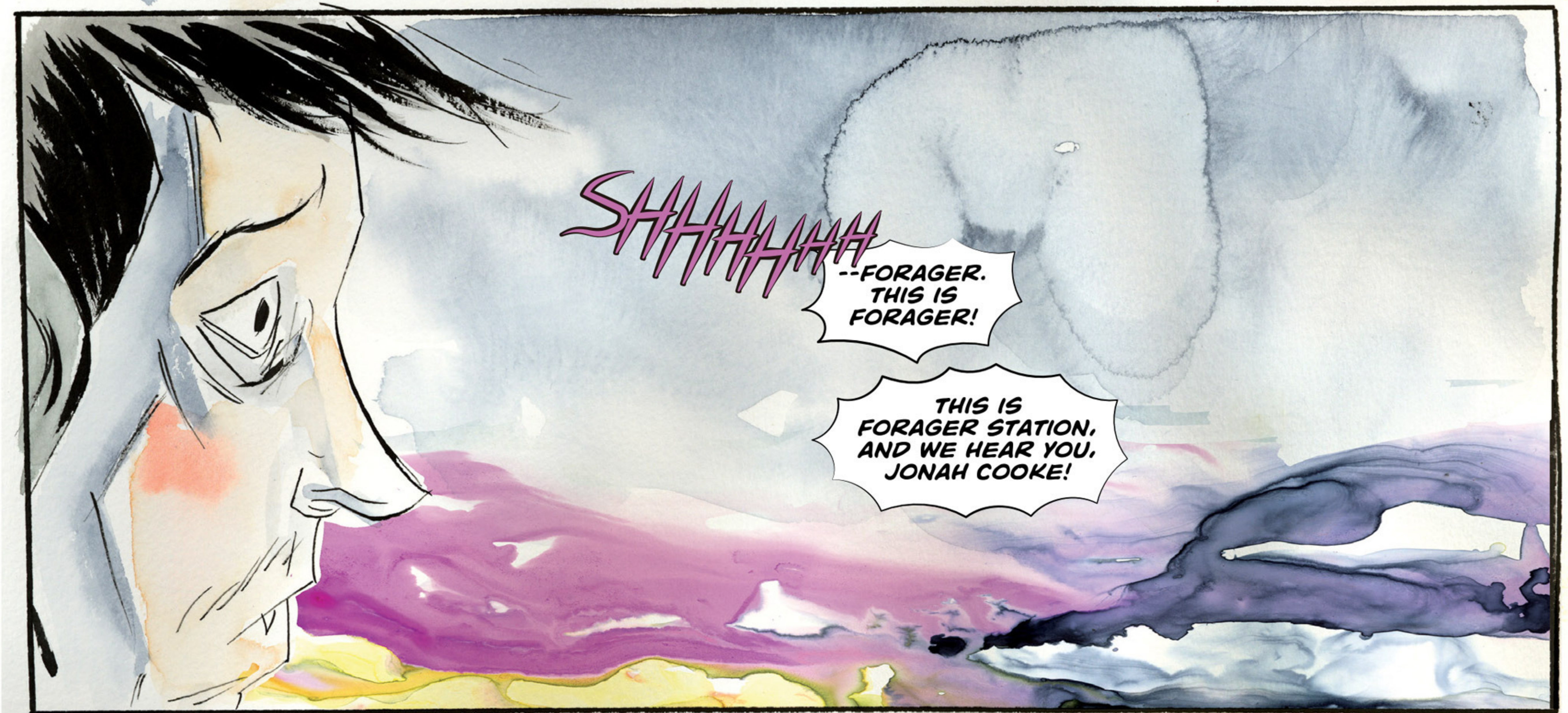
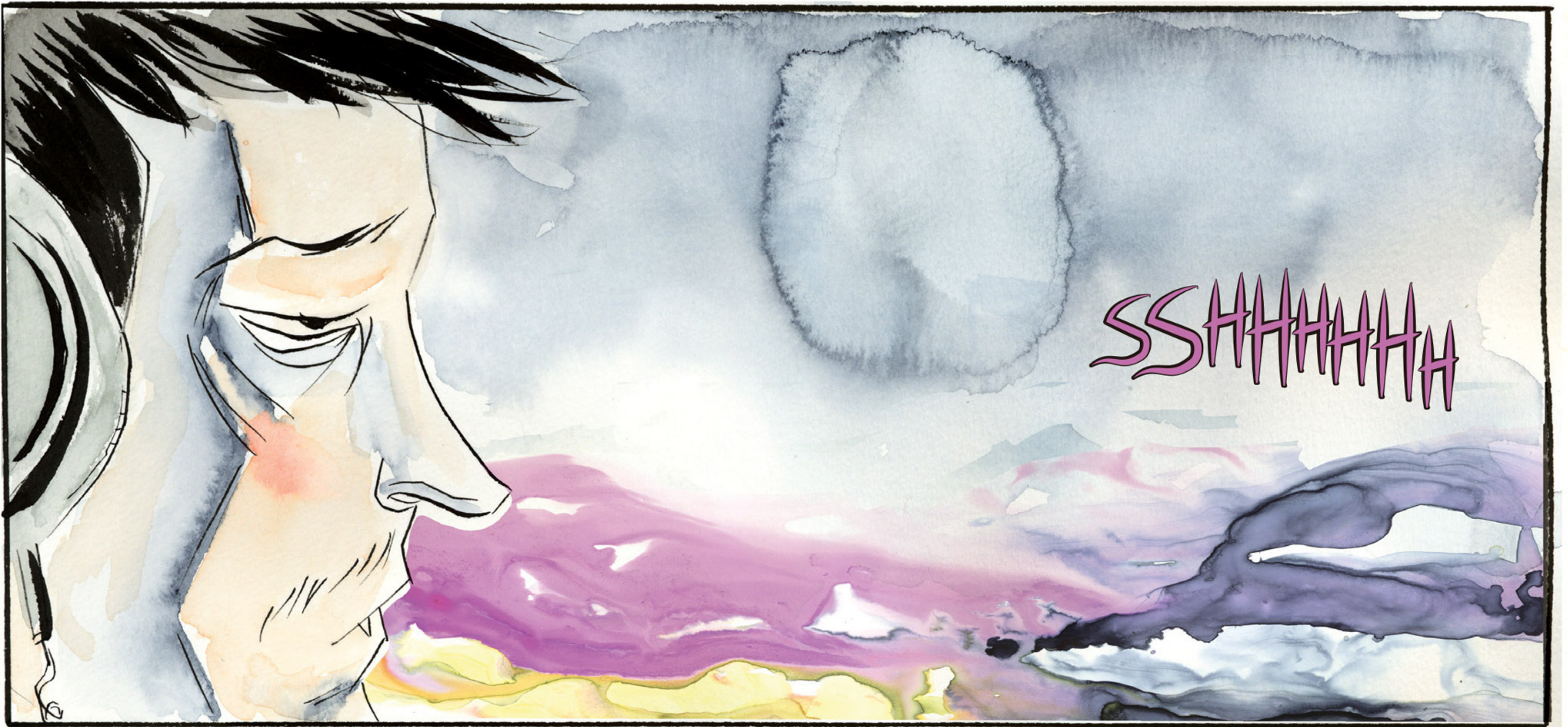
SO WHAT IF SOME
DID? WHAT KIND OF WORLD
DO YOU THINK IS DOWN THERE?
THE ATTEMPTS TO STOP IT, ALL
THE BOMBS AND POISON AND THE
DISEASE THAT FOLLOWED. HELL,
LOOK AT WHAT THEY DID TO
THE SKY. BENEATH THAT
CLOUD COVER? IT'S
PROBABLY HELL.

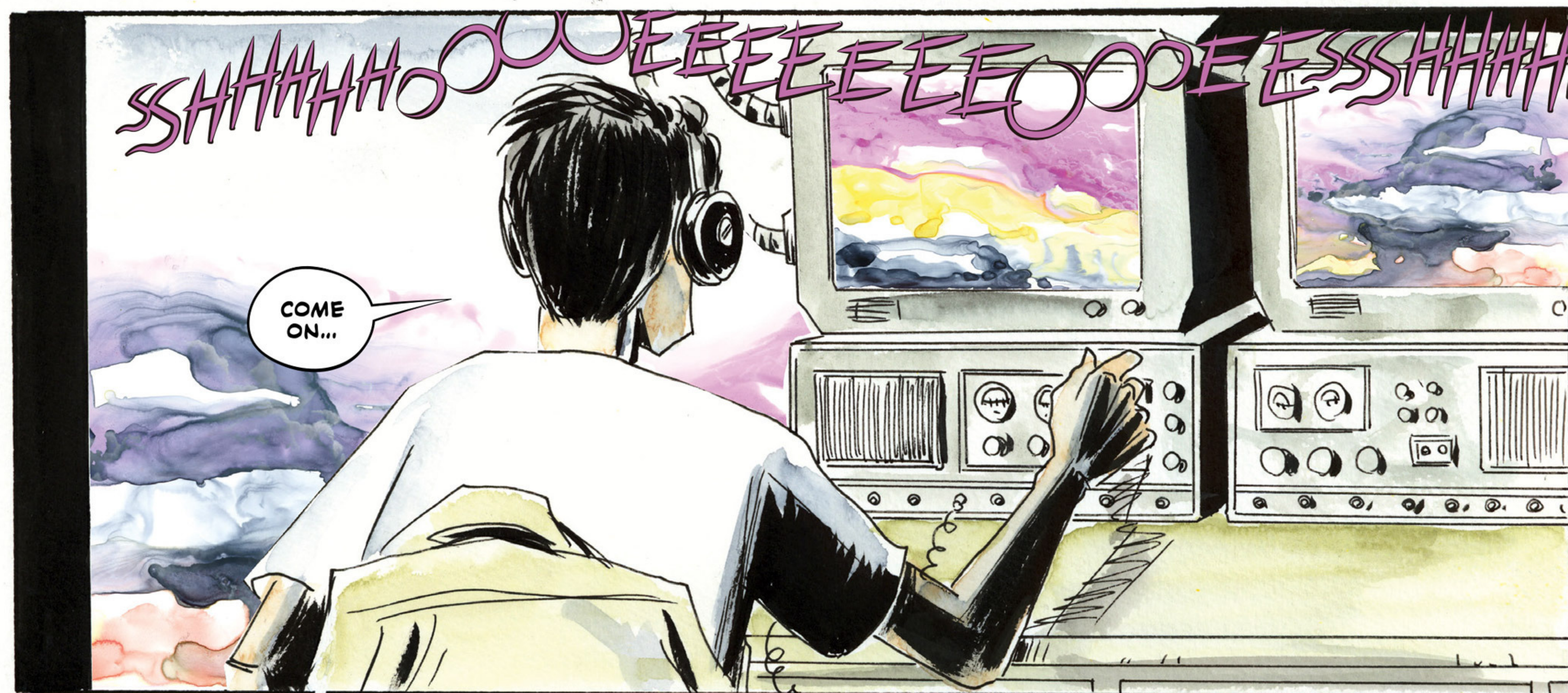
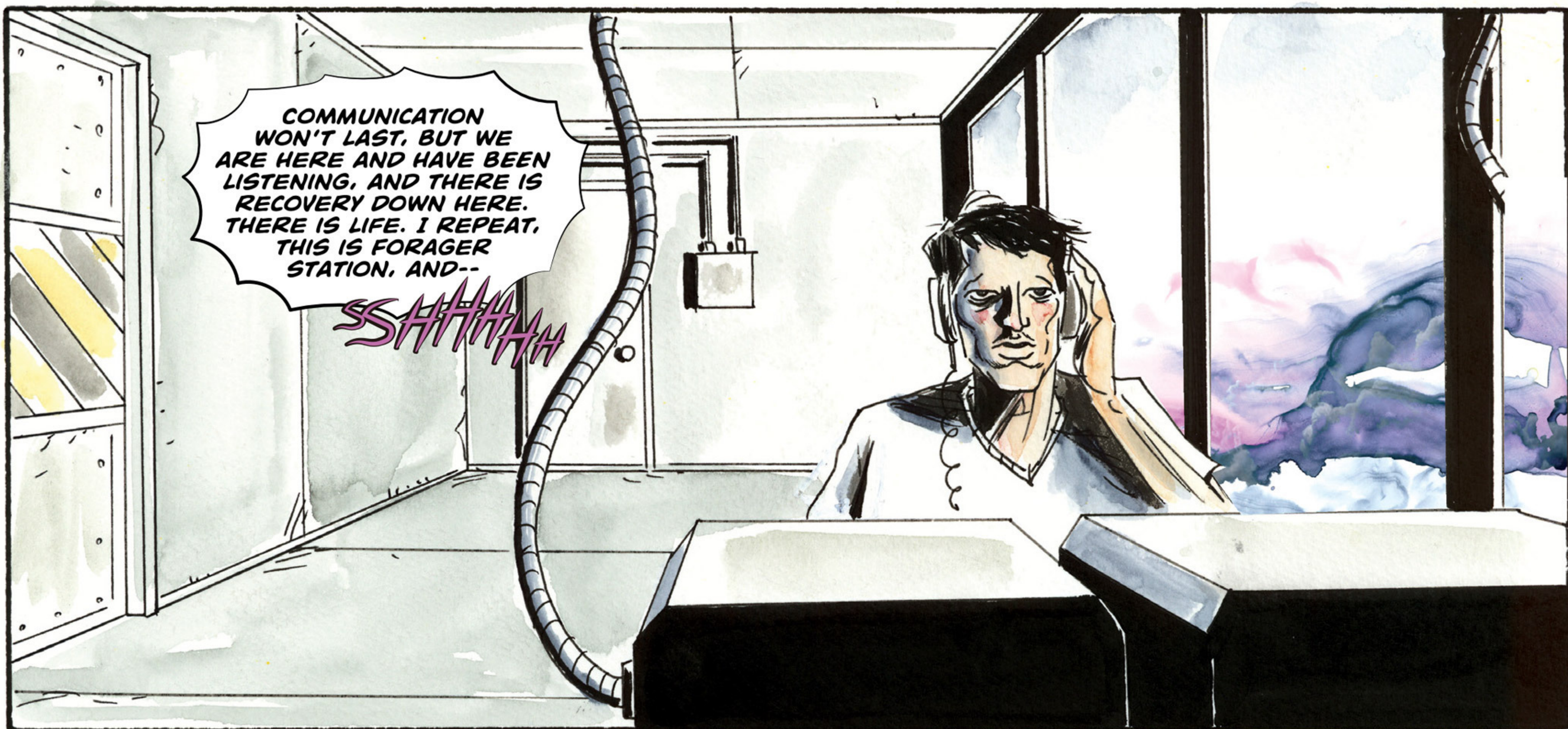
FOR GOD'S
SAKE, I LEARNED
ABOUT THE END
FROM YOU. YOU WROTE
ABOUT IT IN YOUR
BOOK. OTHERWISE I'D
HAVE FORGOTTEN BY
NOW. FRANKLY, I
CAN'T WAIT TO
FORGET AGAIN.

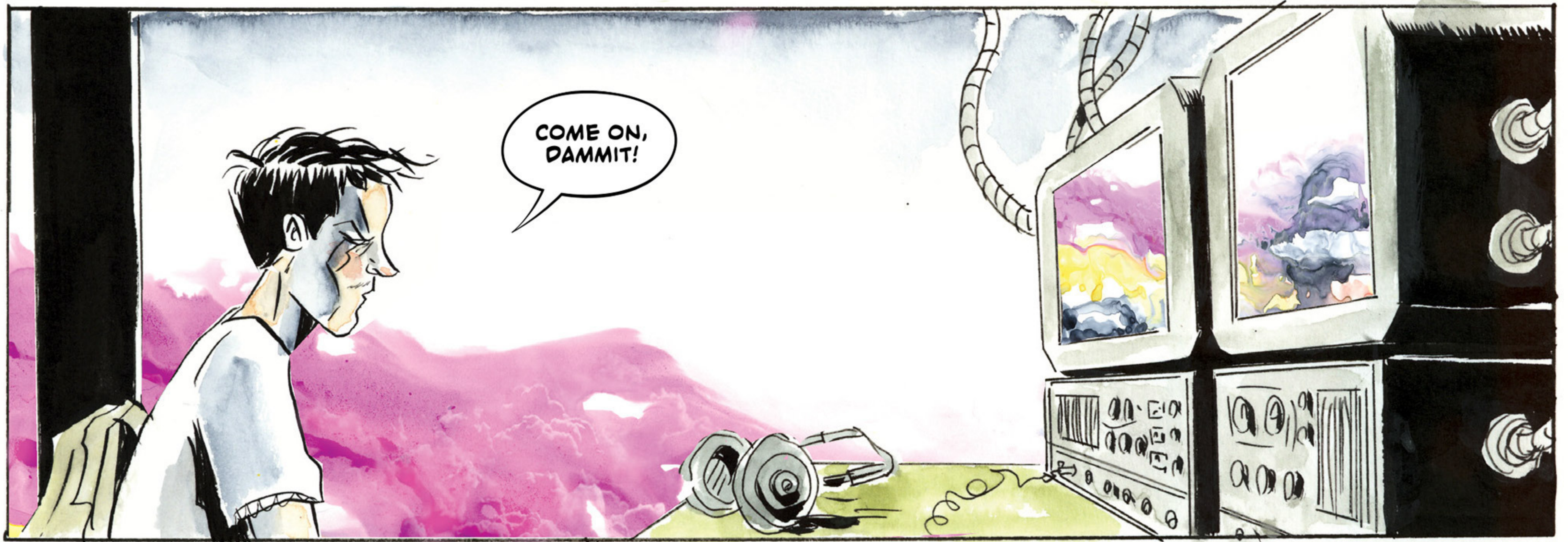
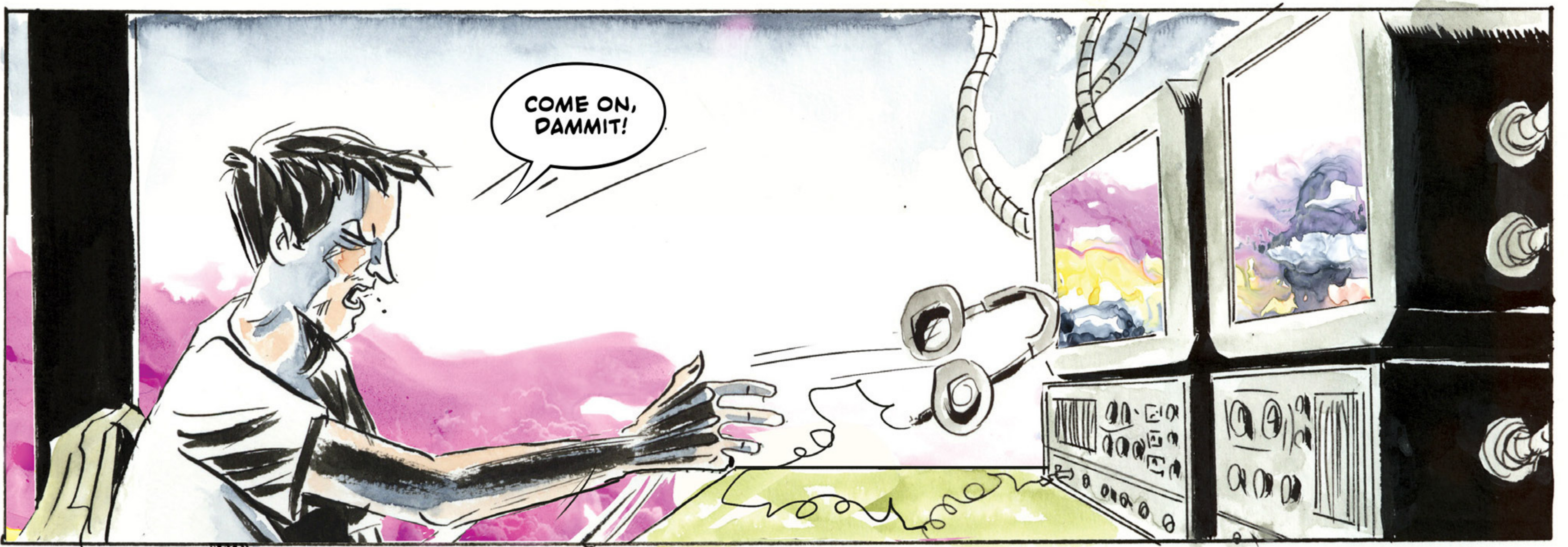














The company where I worked, Modern Home, was housed in a lot about ten minutes from my condo. The lot was part of a loosely designed strip mall. A furniture liquidation place stood about a hundred meters to the west, and to the east lay a series of cheap takeout places, a row of seven in one long structure, like a pill planner.

By the time I arrive, my call from R'overknight is an hour late, and I'm getting concerned. It's nothing, I think, but the truth is that it's uncommon, and I can feel that something is very off.

I think of the mistakes I might have made, the details I might have bungled. A theft often feels like one of those intricate, fragile equations written on blackboards in movies about geniuses---a looping and delicate causal latticework, every part balanced on its predecessor. What if some variable had changed along the way? What if the storage facility was having random maintenance that day? What if a guard had called in sick, or what if the street outside the place was closed for a burst pipe? Hell, there'd been another shooting a few miles from the facility just days before. Three dead in the DMV, the shooter dead, too. Maybe that had affected things. The point is, there are events you can't plan for, and now, as I approach Modern Home, my head is full of them.

Brooke is in my office when I enter. She's looking down at the showroom floor through the big glass wall at the back of the room, but she's doing it cautiously, like she's trying not to be seen by whomever she's observing, craning her neck and standing on tiptoes.

"What's the emergency?" I say.

She jumps.

"Jesus, you scared me," she says, her hand over her chest. She waves me over. "Come here. Check it out. Brody called me in to see if it was a joke. Look and see, and tell me if it is."

$$\begin{aligned} \frac{\partial z}{\partial x} = 2, \frac{\partial z}{\partial y} = 0 \quad x \in \mathbb{R} \quad \frac{a^2 + b^2}{2} \cos \varphi = \frac{(1,0) \cdot (\frac{1}{\sqrt{2}}, \frac{1}{\sqrt{2}})}{\sqrt{\frac{1}{2} + \frac{1}{2}}} \\ x^3 + x^2 + y^3 + z^3 + xyz - 6 = 0 \quad x_1 = \begin{pmatrix} \alpha + \beta + \gamma \\ \alpha \\ \beta \end{pmatrix} \\ \vec{N} = (F_x, F_y, F_z) \quad \sin \angle K \leq \frac{x}{1} \quad e^2 - xyz = e, A(0, e, 1) \\ g_{100} f = \left(\frac{\partial F}{\partial x}, \frac{\partial F}{\partial y} \right) \quad y = \sqrt{x+1} \quad x = t+1 \quad y(1) = 1 \quad a = \frac{1}{x} a + a + z \frac{\sqrt{2}}{2} \\ B = \begin{pmatrix} 2 & 1 & -1 & 0 \\ 3 & 0 & 1 & 2 \end{pmatrix} \quad f(x) = 2^{-x+1}, \epsilon = 0.005 \quad 2 \arctan x - x = 0, I = (1, 10) \\ y' - \frac{\sqrt{y}}{x+2} = 0, y(10) = 1 \quad y_1 y = y_1 + b_1 k_2 \quad \sqrt{1 - 32A + 1} \neq 0 \\ x_1 + y_1 + z_1 = 1 \quad \frac{x^2}{a^2} + \frac{y^2}{b^2} + \frac{z^2}{c^2} = 0 \quad \int R(x, \sqrt{\frac{ax+b}{cx+d}}) dx \quad \begin{pmatrix} 20 \\ 0 \end{pmatrix} \quad b_1 + b_1 \neq 0 \quad z \neq 0 \\ \sum_{k=1}^n (p_k(x) - y_k) \quad F_z = 2x + 7z - 7 = 1 \quad C = \begin{pmatrix} 0,1 \\ 2,0 \end{pmatrix} \quad A = \begin{pmatrix} \sqrt{1+x^2}, 1 \\ x, \sqrt{1+x^2} \end{pmatrix} \quad t=0, y=1, z=2 \\ \lim_{x \rightarrow 0} \frac{e^{2x} - 1}{5x} = \frac{2}{5} \quad \int_0^1 \int_0^1 \int_0^1 z dx dy dz = \int_0^1 \left(\int_0^1 \int_0^1 1 dx dy \right) dz = \int_0^1 1 dz = 1 \quad \cos^2 \alpha + \cos^2 \beta + \cos^2 \gamma = 1 \quad \sqrt{\frac{1}{3}} \approx 0.577 \quad 9.22 \quad (1 + \frac{2}{3})^2 \end{aligned}$$

I walk to the window. There are four of us agents at Modern Home, and each of our offices is backed with a glass wall that looks down on the showroom floor below, a massive hangar designed to look like a suburban street, with five different model homes lined up beside one another. The first house is a geometric contemporary, all glass, corrugated steel and wood laminate. The second home is a classic gray and white Colonial. The third is a standard ranch, and the fourth an example of a custom, a cape with add-ons like an enclosed porch, a playroom...Our specialty is customization, our ability to configure a home however the client wants. Modular isn't just a single structure; it's every component of a structure. Room by room.

The houses have small fake lawns out front, bordered by a sidewalk that runs around the whole fake block. Behind the row stands a theatrically lit backdrop of a summer sky. For a brief period, the manager, my father's old student, had tried placing mannequins along the sidewalk and inside the homes, but the consensus among the staff and customers was that they gave the place a creepy feel, reminiscent of those model homes used in doomsday blast tests of the 1950s. Behind the sky backdrop, the hangar turns into a materials warehouse, like front of stage and backstage.

I scan the floor but see nothing of interest.

Brooke sighs and takes my arm, pulling me closer. She points with her chin, all of this clearly embarrassing to her. "Right there. On the custom."

And then I see what she's gesturing at: a man standing on the balcony of the custom home. He's older, I can see that much from here, maybe in his late sixties, thin and very tall, with a wisp of blond-white hair. He's wearing a T-shirt and jeans, nothing fancy, and he looks relaxed.

As I watch, he gives the house a gentle once-over, running a hand over the balcony railing.

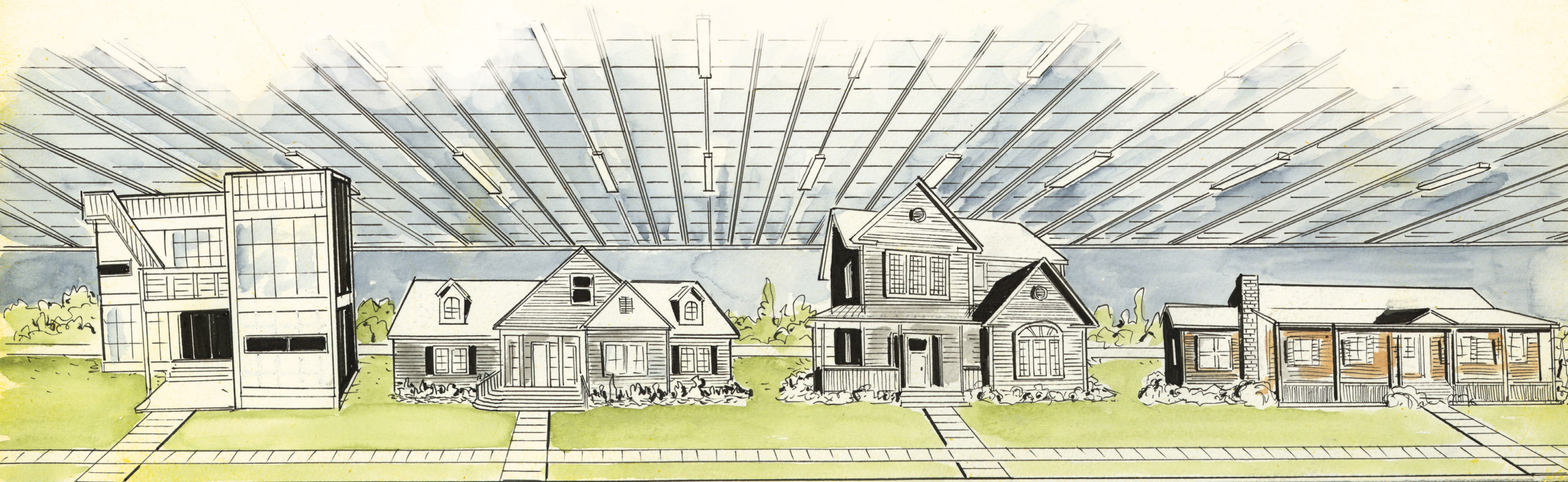
"Brody says he's some kind of billionaire," says Brooke, scanning my face for a reaction. "Please, please tell me he's here to make us all rich."

I look again.

Suddenly I know who he is. I recognize him because of my second profession, and all at once his name appears in my mind--appears like a logo more than a name, a stamped, visual thing. He is Warner Errant, and, yes, he's a billionaire. Not one of those billionaires out in front of the cameras, doing shows or socializing, though. From what I know, Errant was from money to begin with, but made an even bigger fortune in music production--producing popular songs, then founding a company called SIGIL, which led to all sorts of projects to improve recording technologies. Within the music industry, people say he has "diamond ears," both for hit songs and for miniscule but significant improvements to the recording process itself. He has extensive art and sculpture collections, and so has come up over the years in the rooms I frequent.

"So?" says Brooke.

"He's no one. Calm yourself," I tell her, and start walking downstairs to meet him.



On any other day I'd take a real curiosity in someone like Errant, but today, my mind is on that suit. It's over ninety minutes after I was supposed to get the call from R'overnight, and I'm pretty sure something has gone very, very wrong. While I know there's no reason to panic, I can't quell my fears. I've set up thefts where things have gone wrong before, of course, but not in a long time, and not for R'overnight, AND not when the steak was an object of public interest. A botched attempt at stealing a piece of country western history is entertainment news, and that means visibility, which means pressure, and so on.

I walk up the steps to the custom, and find Mr. Errant still there on the porch.

He doesn't see me at first. He's got his back to me, and his hands are planted on the railing and he's looking out over the showroom like a man staring out at his neighborhood in the small, quiet hours. I almost feel like I'm interrupting something speaking to him.

"Morning," I finally say.

He turns to face me.

"Ah," he says, and smiles. "There you are."

He's tall and thin, with white-blue eyes, and the first thing that strikes me is his voice. He has a deep, smooth voice, a radio voice--this dark mixture of the fatherly and gracious that eases you into conversation. I'm caught by how handsome he is, too, even at his age, how the scaffolding is still there beneath the surface, a sharp Nordic angularity. He's old, sure, but his features have that burnished and wind-sharpened quality you see in people who spend a lot of time at high altitudes.

I introduce myself, and he shakes my hand. His grip is large and firm, and again a feeling comes over me like I'm in his home here, like this all belongs to him.

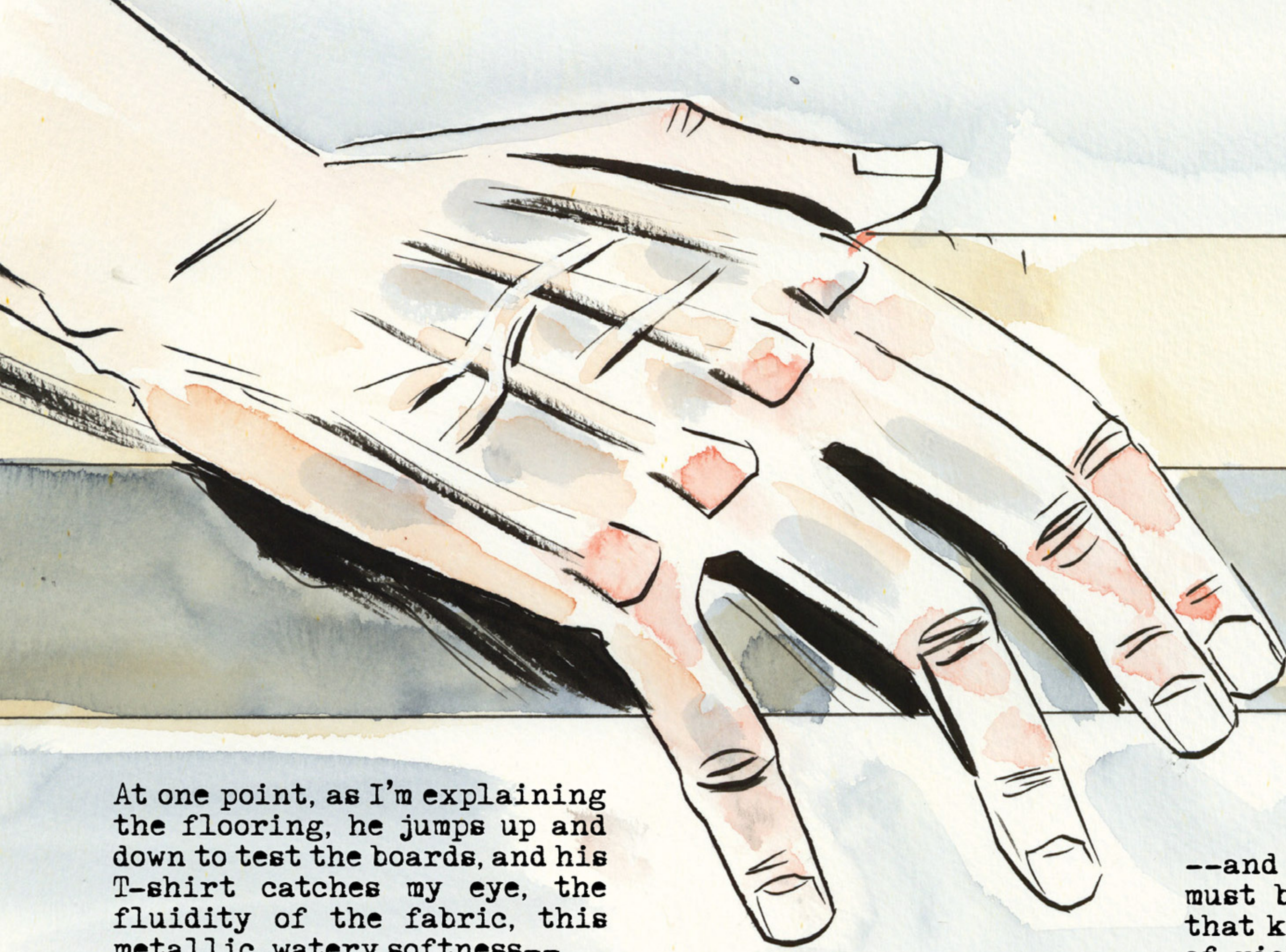
I ask him how I can help.

"First, you can tell me what this wondrous stuff is made of," he says, running a hand over the balcony railing. He seems completely at ease with himself.

I explain that it's a treated wood laminate over a melamine resin. It's used in much of our siding, too, and here I go into my pitch, telling him how our agents work with customers to guide them to make their choices work within their budget.

The whole time, he's smiling at me in this kind, gentle way, nodding. He asks appropriate questions about the process for creating this poly-fiber, or about how we determine if a site is viable for construction. He seems genuinely interested, and yet I have no idea why this is so, and this makes things doubly frustrating, unnerving even; it's like we're playing roles...or rather, like I'm playing a role in front of someone assessing my ability to play it. I keep waiting for him to turn away, to look at anything other than me so I can check my phone again, but he's entirely involved.





At one point, as I'm explaining the flooring, he jumps up and down to test the boards, and his T-shirt catches my eye, the fluidity of the fabric, this metallic, watery softness--

--and it occurs to me that his clothes must be made especially for him. He's that kind of rich, I remember, the kind of rich sewn into the quality of the smallest, subtextual details. Wealth that's not just there in a watch or shoes, but everywhere. Down in the fibers.

See, THAT'S "custom," I think to myself. And, suddenly, I'm frustrated by the situation, by the cheapness of the custom house we're standing in, the chasm between his version of custom and ours. And more than this, I'm frustrated by whatever game this rich man is playing with me.

I finish my pitch and ask him if he's interested in coming up to my office, or if he's got enough to go on.

"Sure, I'd like to come up to your office," he says. "There's a lot more to discuss." His eyes are twinkling.

"Great," I say, trying to hide my chagrin. "It's just up here." I gesture to the stairs.

"Terrific," he says. But he doesn't move.

"If you just follow me..." I say.

"Uh-huh," he says, but still he doesn't move, just stands there, and I wonder if there's something wrong with him. His eyes are fixed on me.

I try again. "Sir, if you'll just--"

"Do you know who I am?" he says. And while his smile is constant, there's something a bit hard in this question, a directness that sets me back a bit.

I tell him that I do, actually.

"Good," he says, never taking his eyes off of me. "I'd like to place a big order with you."

Above us, I see Brooke peeking through the window, no shame anymore.

"Wonderful," I say. "How big are you thinking?"

"Pretty...substantial," he says, finally turning away, toward the room.

As he turns, I quickly check my phone for word from R'overnight. Nothing. My stomach tightens. Two hours late.

"I'm working on a project with some people," says Errant. "A clinic, or retreat. It's nowhere near here, though. It's far, far away."

"Well, I'm afraid we only work locally," I tell him, listing the farthest towns we accommodate.

"I see," he says, turning back to me, looking serious now. "Well, I brought something to change your mind."

I start to tell him that I'm just a manager, but he just keeps going, taking a small suitcase from beneath the porch furniture. He puts it on the chair between us. The suitcase is a simple wheel board bag, black, nothing special.

As he works the bag onto the chair, I check my phone again.

Still nothing.

The DMV shooting, I think. It had to be. The beefed-up police presence. And now the fiercer worries swarm in. My mind attacks me, citing everything I did wrong on this one. Everything I've done wrong dating back to the Quad. Back to the balloon... Everything wrong with my life.

"I tried to put together a plan for earlier," says Errant, unzipping the suitcase. "I asked you if you knew who I was."

"Right," I say. I'm trying to put together a plan for approaching the suit situation. Most connections in theft are all done through collapsible rigs. I'm trying to figure out how to protect the people I've paid, and how to get word to the ones paid through proxies. A cracking sort of sound interrupts my thoughts, and I realize it's me, grinding my teeth.

"And?" says Errant. He's clearly said something I've missed.

"I'm sorry. What?"

Errant smiles in that gentle way. "I said," he says, "forgive me for asking again, Jonah, but do you know who I am?"

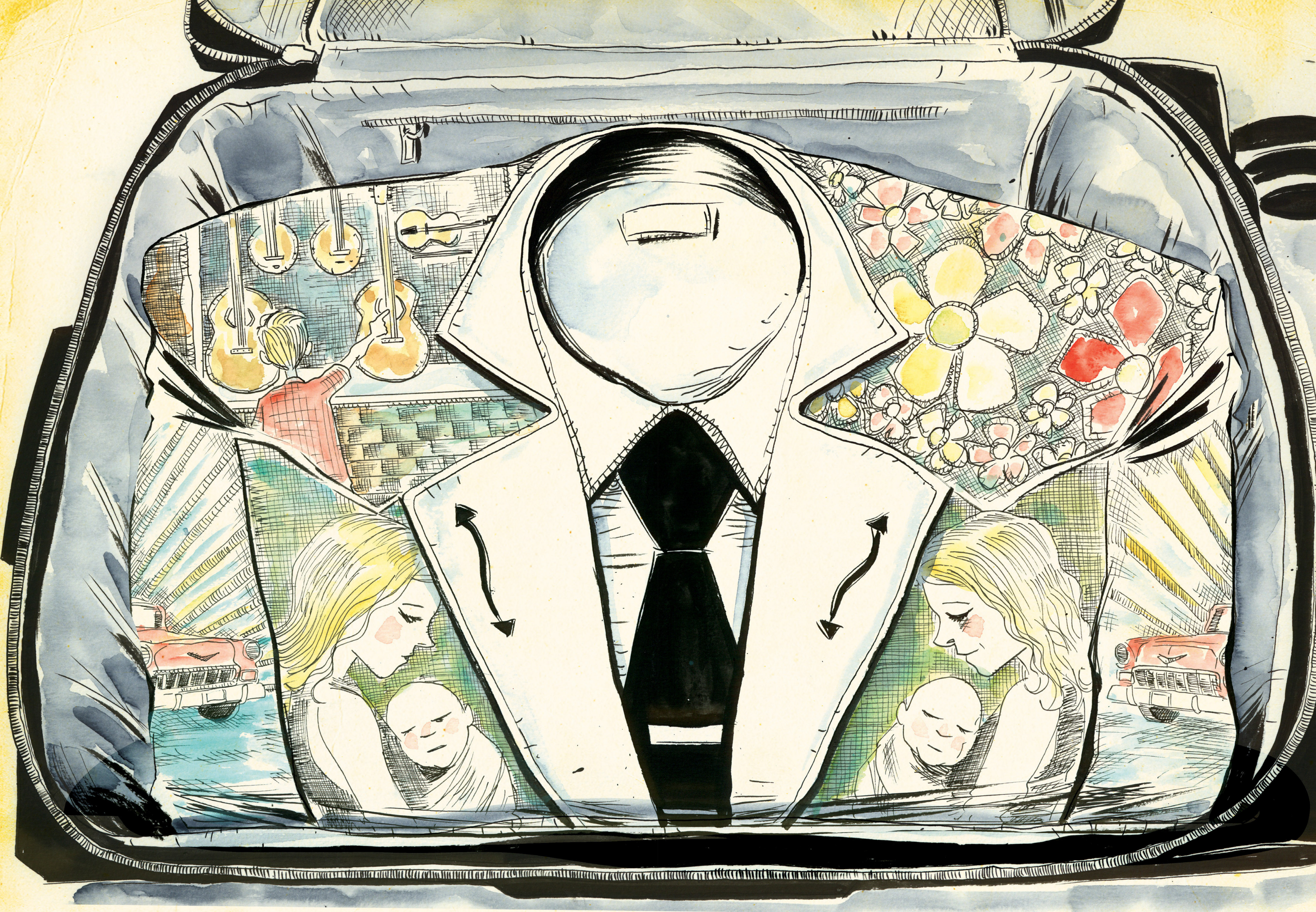
"Yes. I told you already." I'm losing my patience here. R'overknight is likely waiting somewhere for his steak, thinking I screwed him over, or simply screwed this up, and--

Errant unzips the bag. "Well, then, forgive me for asking a third time, but..."

And suddenly I hear it: that phrase. Forgive me for asking.

The bag opens and I know what's going to be inside before it does, but there it is...





I look at Errant, and then it all comes together.

ERRANT.

By definition the word means “traveling in search of adventure.”

An “errant knight” is a roving knight.

R’overknight. That’s who he is.

I notice Brooke staring at us openly now, no more caution. She has her face cupped to the window and her breath appears on the glass in tiny blooms of fog.

“You shouldn’t be here,” I say to Errant.

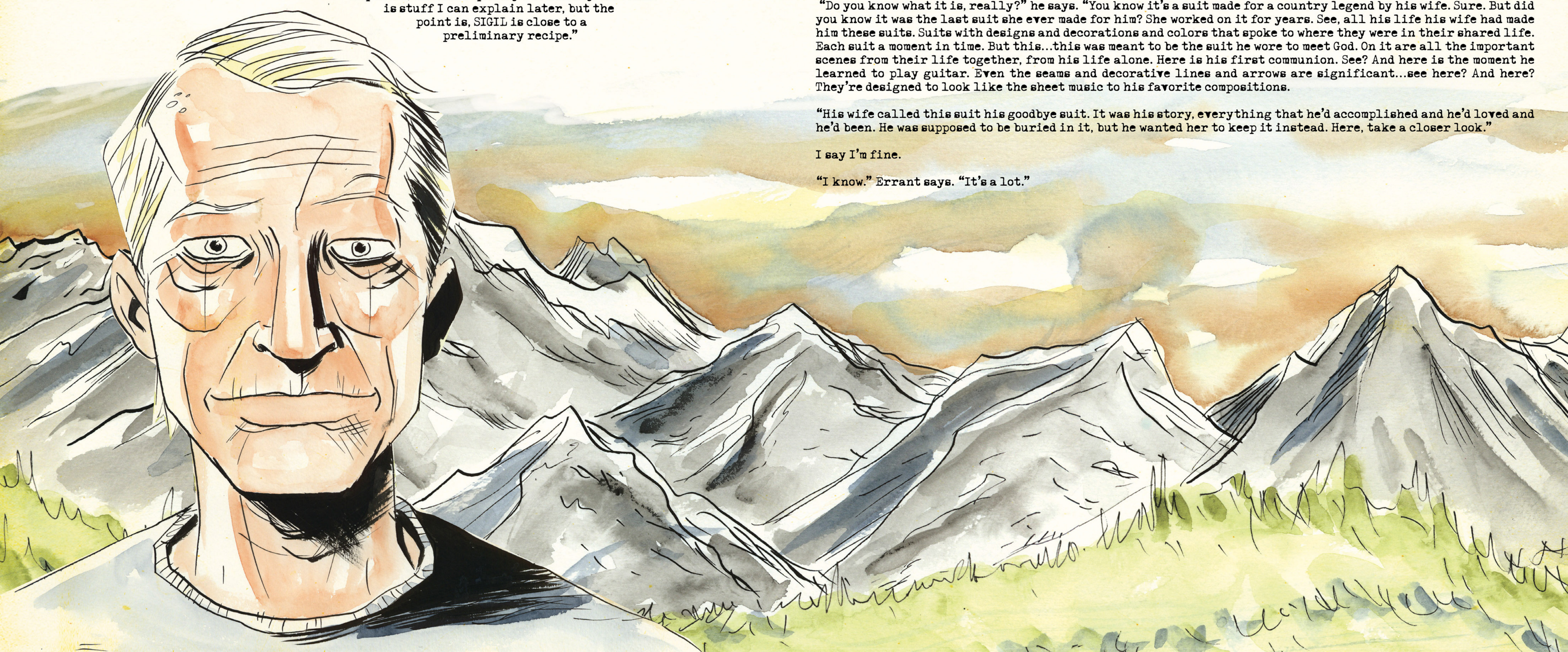
“I know,” he says, raising a hand in a gesture of calm, that radio voice soothing. “But like I said, I have a big order to place with you.”

I try to process this. I ask him if he means with Modern Home, or with me.

“With you, of course, Jonah,” he says. “I meant what I said. I’m working with people to set up a retreat. A special place. It’ll be far away from here, in the mountains.”

“What kind of retreat?”

“Jonah, right now, there are five corporations, all major corporations,” he says, “working on a cure for cellular senescence. A cure for aging. Really, though, it’s a cure for death itself,” Errant says, putting his hands in his pockets, kicking at the wood floor with his toe. “See, the end of senescence also causes a kind of spasmodic, hyper immunity to illness and infection. Something no one expected, but still pretty revelatory. All this is stuff I can explain later, but the point is, SIGIL is close to a preliminary recipe.”



“A cure for death,” I say. I understand what he’s saying, but some part of me just wants to slow this conversation down. Have you ever found yourself in a moment you know will be important to the course of the rest of your life, but also a moment you were completely unprepared for that day?

“That’s ridiculous,” I say, just trying to slow the conversation down.

“No, it’s not, and you know it’s not. You’re just trying to take in what I’m telling you, and, yes, I know it’s a lot. But you follow the research at least a little--you’ve told me so.”

He says this kindly, but there’s that edge in his voice again, that small table corner that might catch you as you pass by. And, suddenly, all the late-night conversations with this man come rushing back to me. All the things I said to him about my mother, my fears, things I said precisely because I’d never meet him. Yet here he is. And more than ever before, I feel this overwhelming sensation of being trapped, and I just want to get away from Errant, from the situation, from this place, this fake neighborhood of manufactured homes and grass and this suburb, and my mind springs into action, starts working on the problem, on how I’m going to extricate myself from this, steal myself away--not just from the moment, but anything connected to it. The math starts going up on the board...

“Heh. Don’t do that.” Errant puts a hand on my shoulder, and it’s heavier than I’d expect, a gentle anchor.

“Don’t run. Just listen to me. Hear me out. You’re a great thief. Look at this. Look at what you were able to steal.”

He lifts the suit from its case. He does this carefully, respectfully.

In the light the colors radiate, the sequins flash. I’d thought of the thing as some kind of silly show costume. A spangly suit with arrows and boots on it. Pandering. But it’s actually quite beautiful. The fabric is an ivory white, and instead of a consistent design, some repeating country and western pattern, the suit is covered in singular scenes. On the breast is a threaded portrait of a woman holding a baby. On the shoulder, a boy pointing to a guitar in a store window. On the arm, a young man driving a Cadillac. It’s gorgeous, really. It makes me think of stained glass windows and tapestries.

“Do you know what it is, really?” he says. “You know it’s a suit made for a country legend by his wife. Sure. But did you know it was the last suit she ever made for him? She worked on it for years. See, all his life his wife had made him these suits. Suits with designs and decorations and colors that spoke to where they were in their shared life. Each suit a moment in time. But this...this was meant to be the suit he wore to meet God. On it are all the important scenes from their life together, from his life alone. Here is his first communion. See? And here is the moment he learned to play guitar. Even the seams and decorative lines and arrows are significant...see here? And here? They’re designed to look like the sheet music to his favorite compositions.

“His wife called this suit his goodbye suit. It was his story, everything that he’d accomplished and he’d loved and he’d been. He was supposed to be buried in it, but he wanted her to keep it instead. Here, take a closer look.”

I say I’m fine.

“I know.” Errant says. “It’s a lot.”

He puts the suit back in the suitcase. "She made me one, too," he says. "As a thank-you for helping the family. It's just as pretty as this one. Maybe prettier. It's got my life sewn into it, Jonah. And I'd have had you steal it instead of this one, but I had it burned."

"Burned?" I say.

"Burned to ash. So listen to me when I tell you are not alone."

"What are you talking--"

His hand tightens on my shoulder.

"I have lived a life fuller than any I expected as a man your age. I had a wife I loved. Jennifer. I have children and grandchildren I adore. John and Forrest and Adele. And I have tried to live a good life, making music that makes people happy. I have tried to affect the world in good ways, through our foundation. We have built schools in places that had none, and developed music education programs.

"I am seventy-two years old, Jonah. And my story is a good story. Do you understand me?"

"My suit makes a good suit. But I don't want it to be over. I am supposed to be okay with it, but I'm not. I lay awake at night and I am screaming inside. I pass a mirror and see my face and think, who...the HELL...is that?"

"A month ago, they had me dip my right ear in a plaster so they could make a mold of it. Look."

He puts a pinkie in his ear, wiggles it, and then shows it to me. The tip has blood on it.

"Ruptured something that won't heal all the way. I hear different now. There's a whistling."

He purses his lips and makes a noise, a whistle but shriller.

I remove his hand from my shoulder and step back.

"I don't understand what any of this has to do with me," I say, though I can feel what's coming. "In fact, I don't even get why you'd--"

"There's something I need you to steal. Period. If you steal it, SIGIL will have a great advantage in the research I'm telling you about. We'll have the advantage over our competitors. A huge jump on them."

I glance up, looking for Brooke, but she's gone.

"Why not just ask me the conventional way?" I say.

"Because it'll be a trickier job than normal, Jonah. And because... this is too big to ask of you that way. I wanted to see you, to tell you I feel the way you do. And that I know many people who do. In fact, I suspect more and more people do these days.





"Imagine how it was at the start. When humanity was young, a child. You lived among the same people every day, saw a small breadth of land. Your life was huge. Your story, and the stories of those you knew, were the only stories. But now, we're all connected. We know of each other. We affect each other all day, every day. We all feel it, that it's the end of something. The rising waters. The overlap of culture and war. The hot, intense, buzzing, buzzing, buzzing...it's like everything has come to this.

"Old age is being aware of yourself, your fragility; it's being scared, and humanity is in its old age now, is my belief. We are a frail old man, aware of our brittleness. All it'll take is a push. A fall and a broken hip. A plague. A bomb. A cataclysm. And we will start to fall apart, fast, just like your mother did."

At the mention of my mother, I feel my rage rising, but he stops me before I say anything.

"But it doesn't have to be that way, Jonah," he says. "Millions of years of history could change right here, on this porch. With you and me."

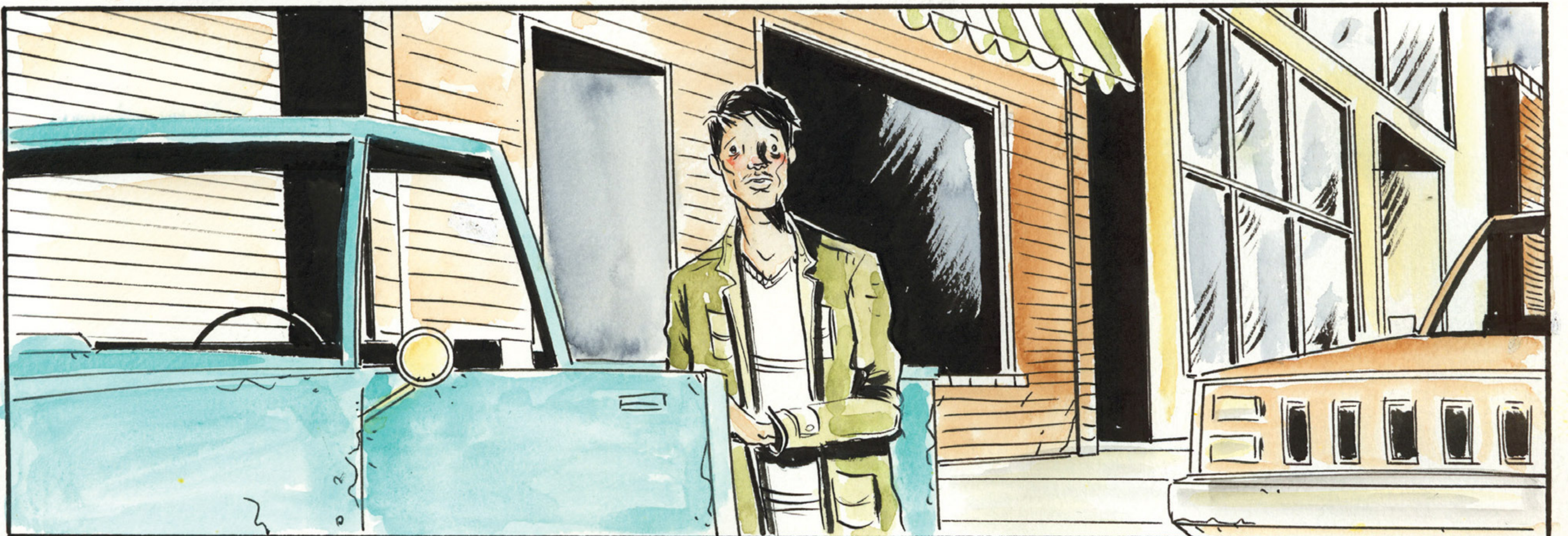
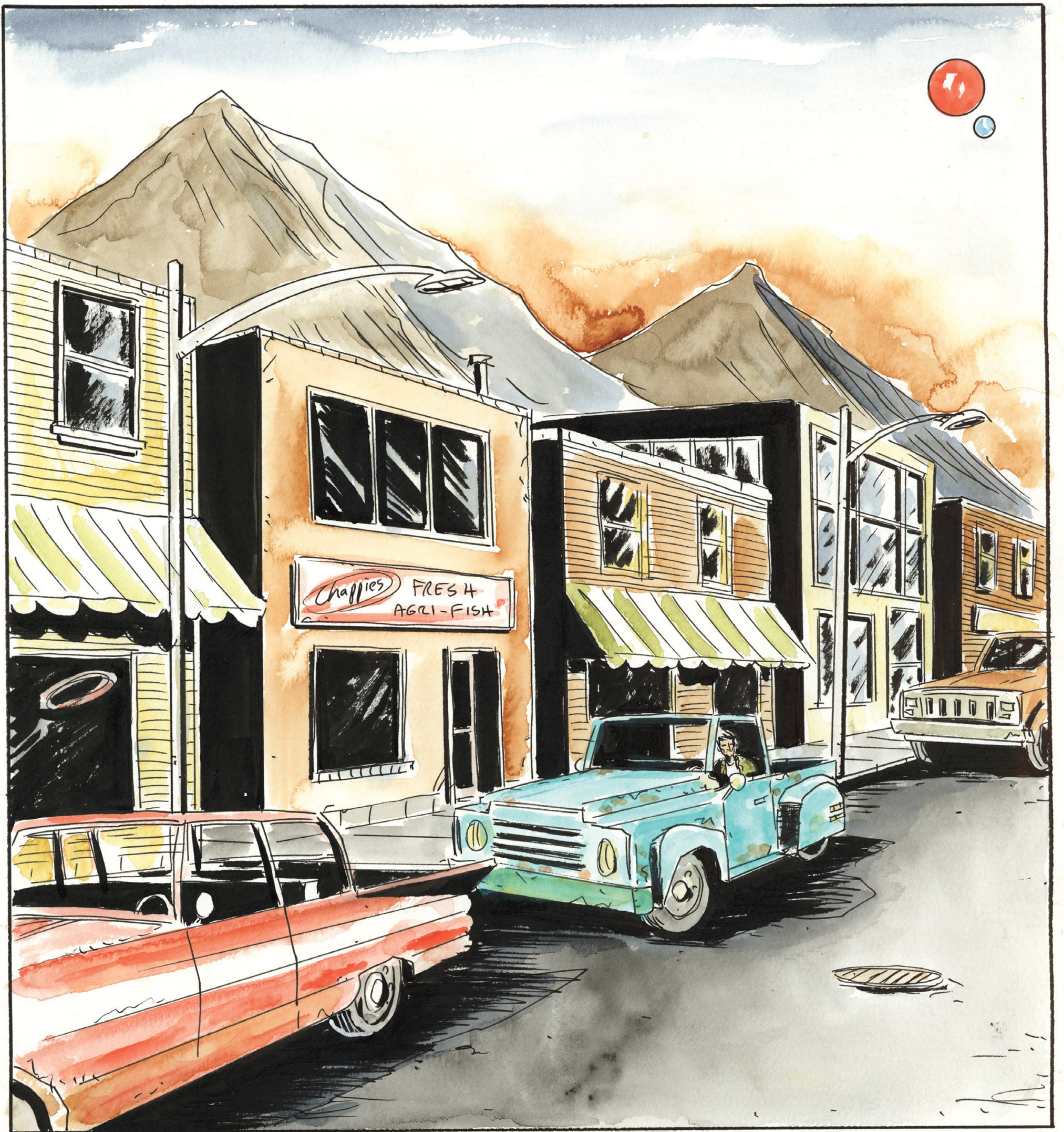
The whole situation is too much. I look away from him, at the fake sky behind us. The brushstrokes are visible in the clouds, in the swirls of white and gray. The blue is so bright in the floodlights it hurts my eyes.

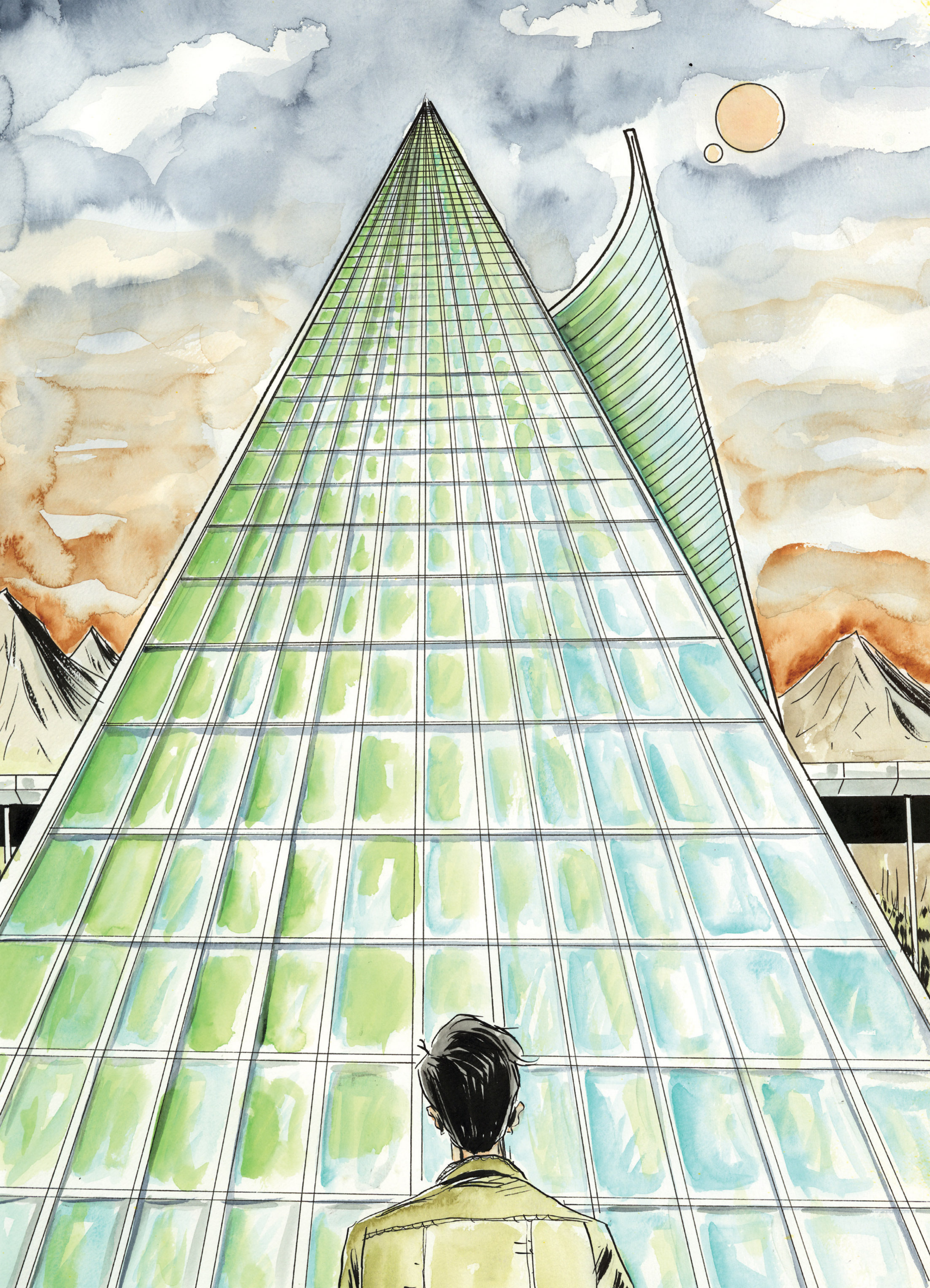
"What is it you need me to steal?" I say.

"It's not a what," says Errant.

"It's a who."

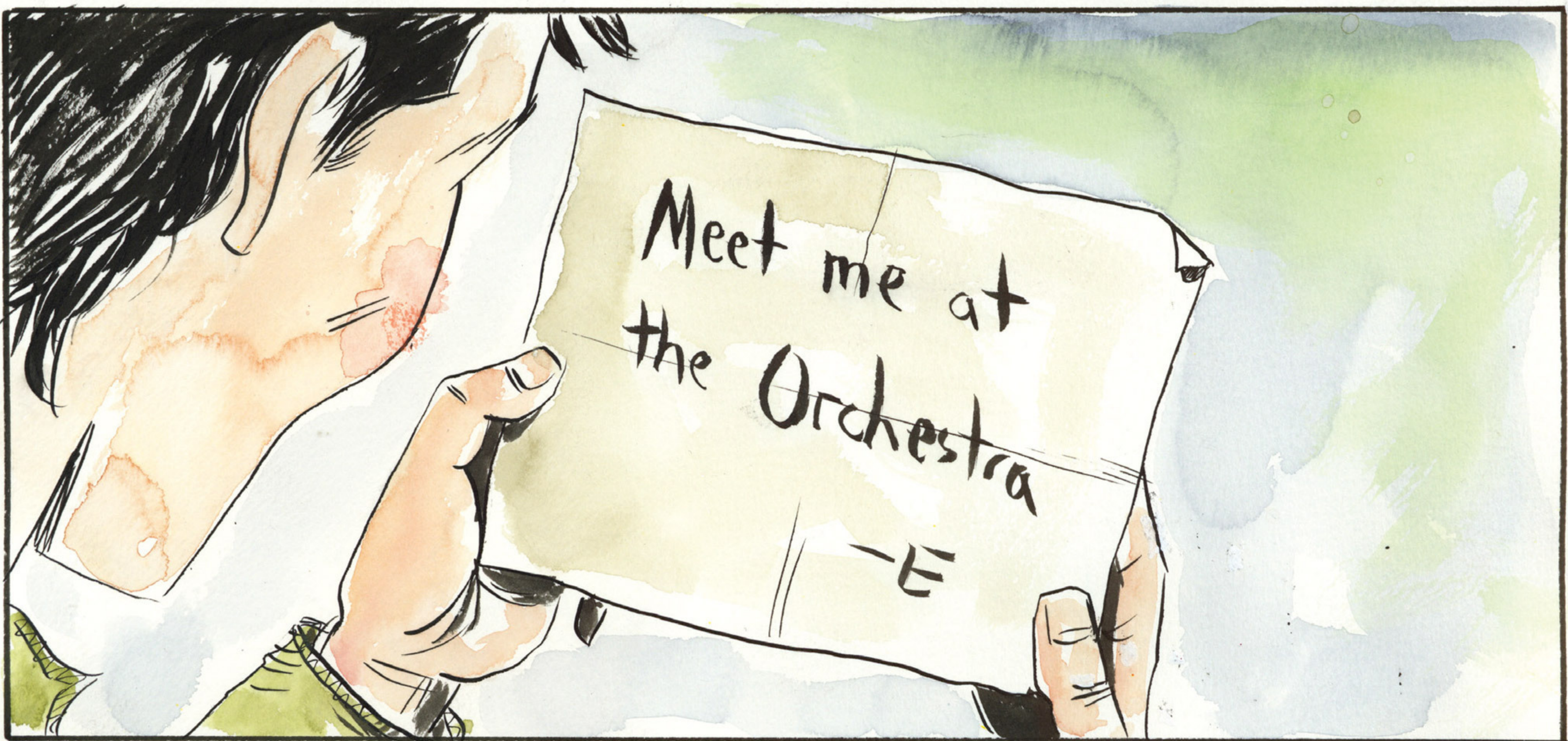
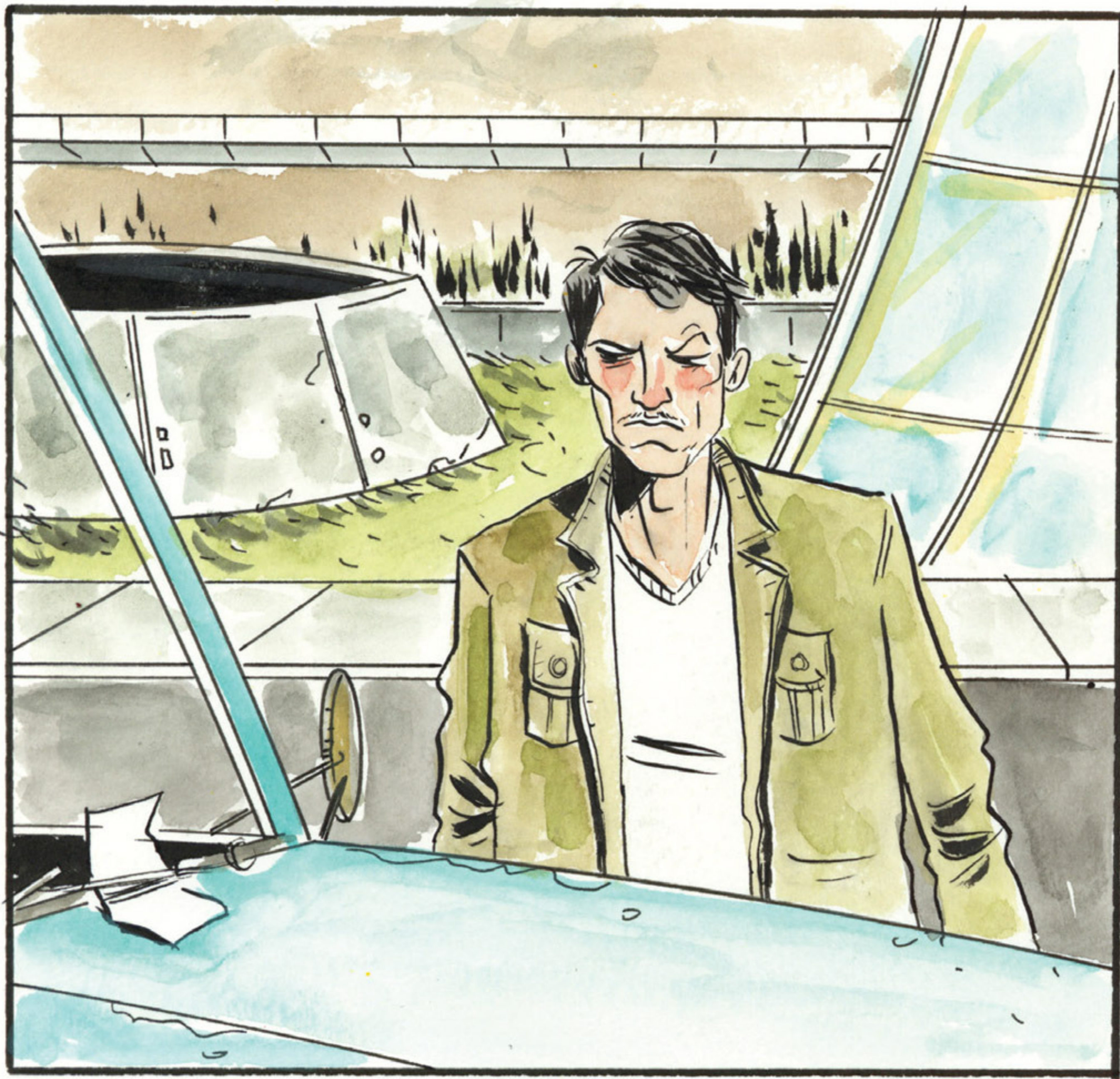












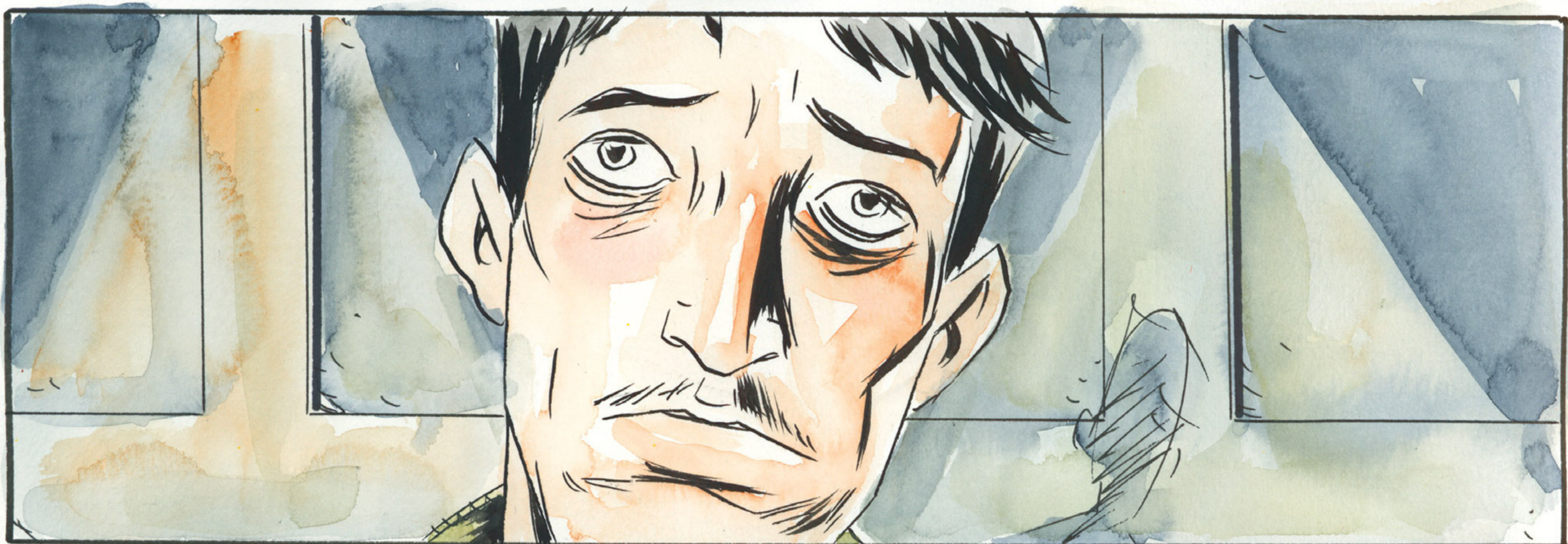




"TELL ME
SOMETHING..."

"SEE THE CLOUD THERE?
THE BLUE ONE? AT
TWELVE O' CLOCK..."

"AT TWELVE O' CLOCK..."







I'M
GOING DOWN,
ERRANT.

GOING
DOWN?



YOU SAID IT
YOURSELF, I HEARD
SOMETHING. IT'S
NOT DEAD DOWN
THERE. SO I'M
GOING.

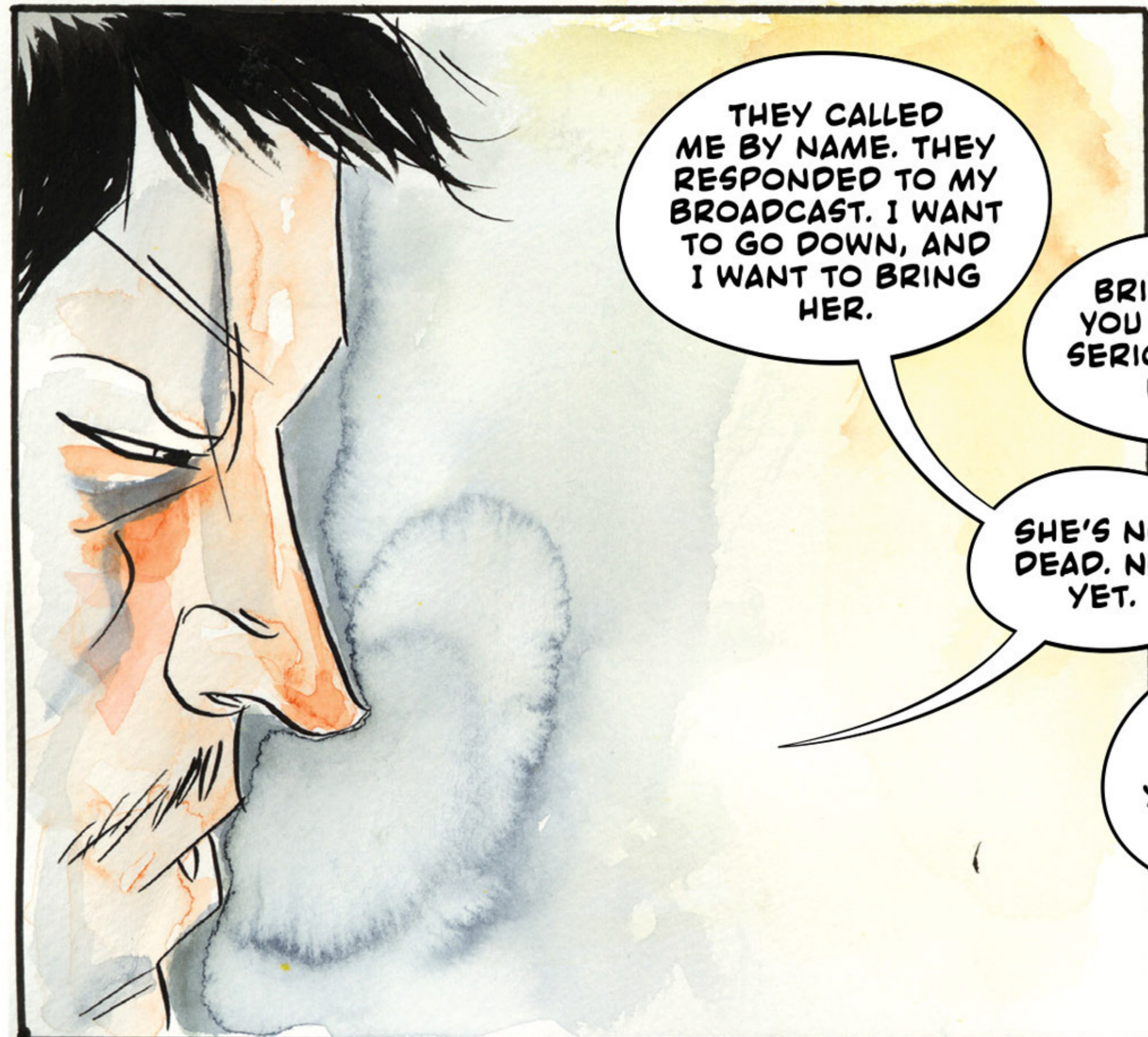


SLOW
DOWN. YOU
HEARD
WHAT?



FORAGER
STATION. I
HEARD
FORAGER.

FORAGER?
COME ON,
JONAH. IT WAS
LIKELY--

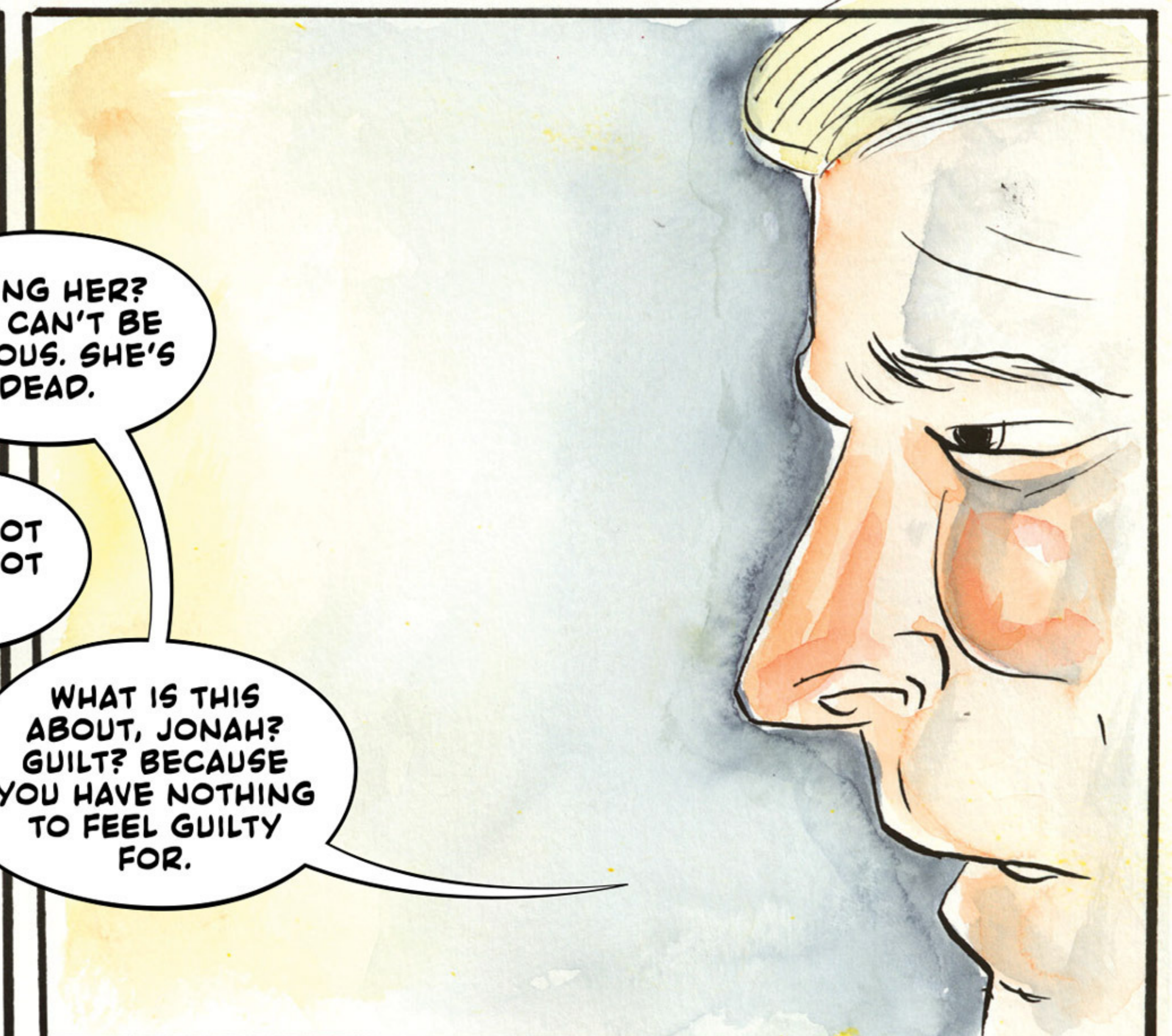


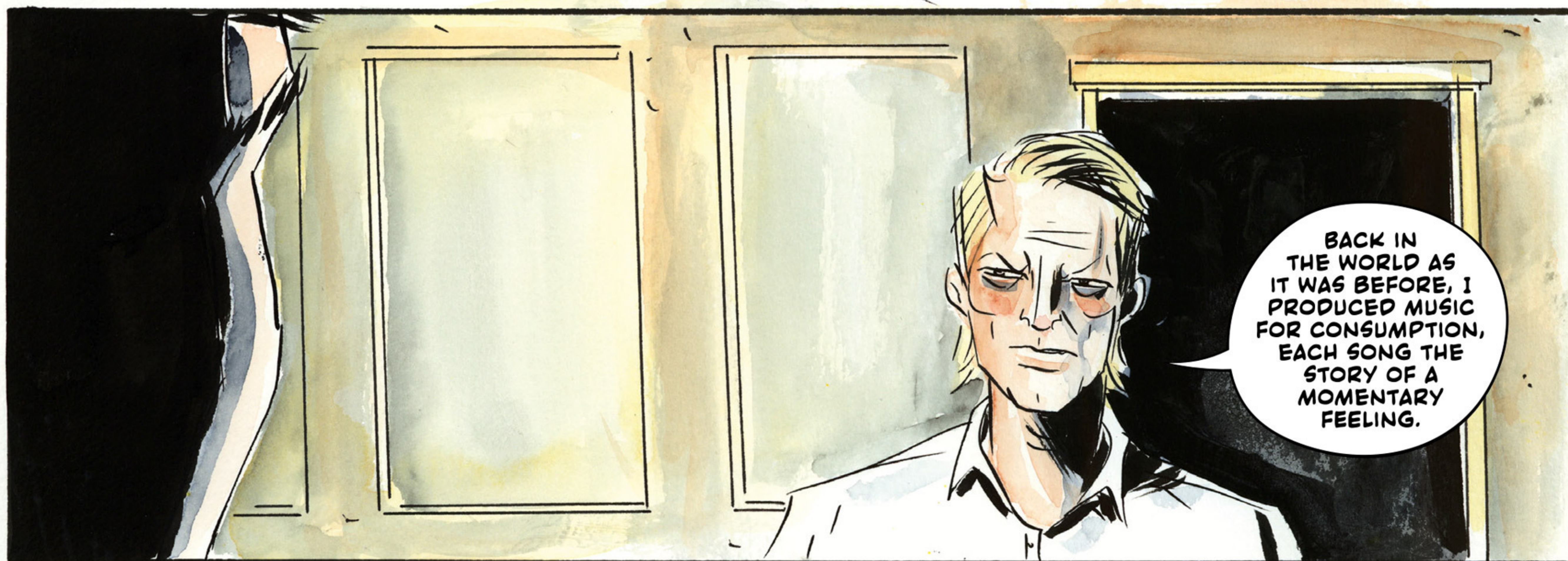
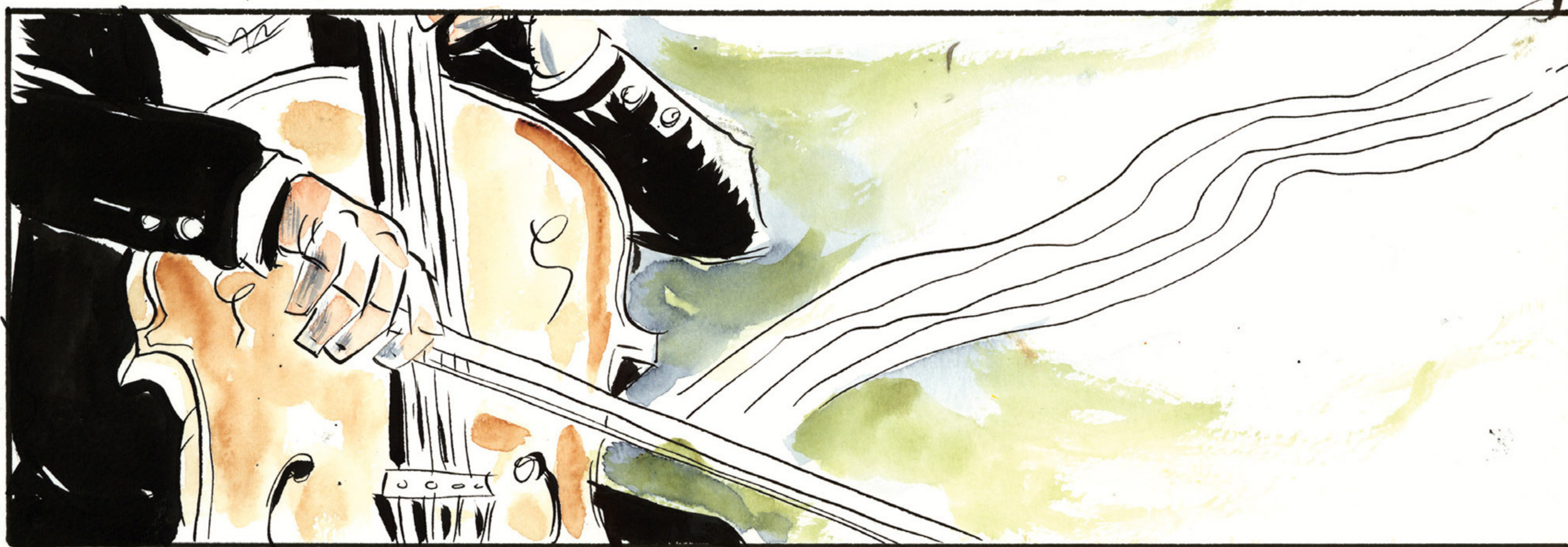
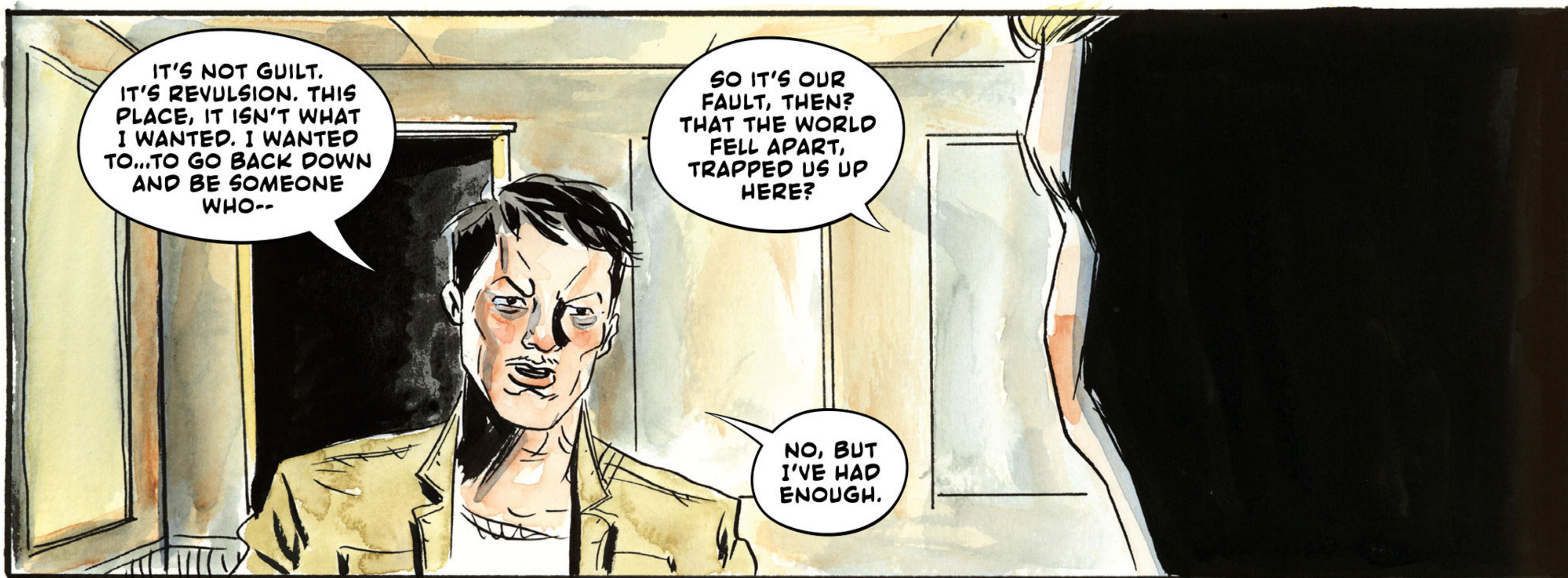
THEY CALLED
ME BY NAME. THEY
RESPONDED TO MY
BROADCAST. I WANT
TO GO DOWN, AND
I WANT TO BRING
HER.

BRING HER?
YOU CAN'T BE
SERIOUS. SHE'S
DEAD.

SHE'S NOT
DEAD. NOT
YET.

WHAT IS THIS
ABOUT, JONAH?
GUILT? BECAUSE
YOU HAVE NOTHING
TO FEEL GUILTY
FOR.





"I USED TO TAKE THE SAME FIVE CHORDS.

"LEAPS OF FOURTHS AND FIFTHS, STACKED THIRDS...

"ALL THE PRETTY HARMONIES, DESIGNED TO BRING PEOPLE BACK TO THE SPECIAL TIMES IN THEIR LIVES, LIKE TINY MEMORY PALACES.

"LITTLE STRUCTURES BUILT AROUND THESE EXPERIENCES WE'VE ALL HAD, EVEN IF SPECIFICS MIGHT DIFFER.

"LOVE LOST, LOVE WON, LOVE UNRETURNED, GENERAL JOY, GENERAL DESPAIR.

"HERE, THOUGH...IN THIS PLACE...

"I MAKE SOMETHING UNHEARD OF.

"MUSIC THAT CONNECTS WITH NOTHING THAT CAME BEFORE.

"MUSIC BUILT ON UNCOMMON INTERVALS, BIG LEAPS OUTSIDE THE OCTAVE, TRITONES AND TWELVE-TONES AND STRANGE TUNINGS.

"COMPOSITIONS THAT LAST MONTHS. EVEN YEARS, JONAH.

"THIS SONG YOU'RE HEARING, IT'S YEARS LONG.

"AND THERE ARE NEW NOTES BENT INTO IT. THINGS WE COULDN'T EVEN HEAR BEFORE.





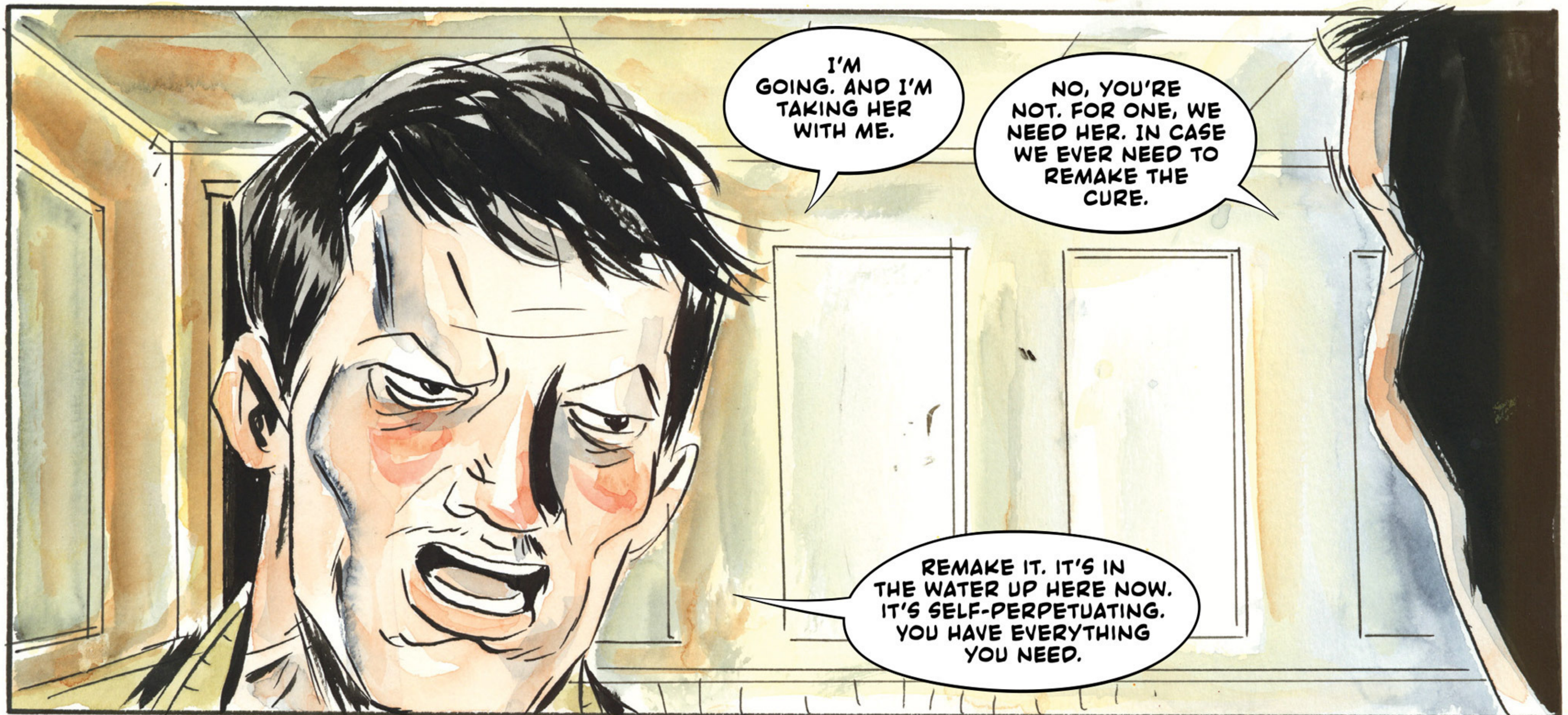
"BEFORE ALL OF THIS, I
TOLD YOU WE WERE AN
OLD MAN, THE HUMAN
RACE.

"NOW, THOUGH, WE'RE
CHILDREN. EVERYTHING
IS UP THERE TO BE
EXPERIENCED.

"IT MIGHT NOT HAVE BEEN
OUR PLAN, BUT THIS...THIS
IS EXACTLY WHAT WE
SHOULD BE DOING. WE'RE
BECOMING UP HERE.

"CLIMBING A LADDER
TO A NEW PLACE."

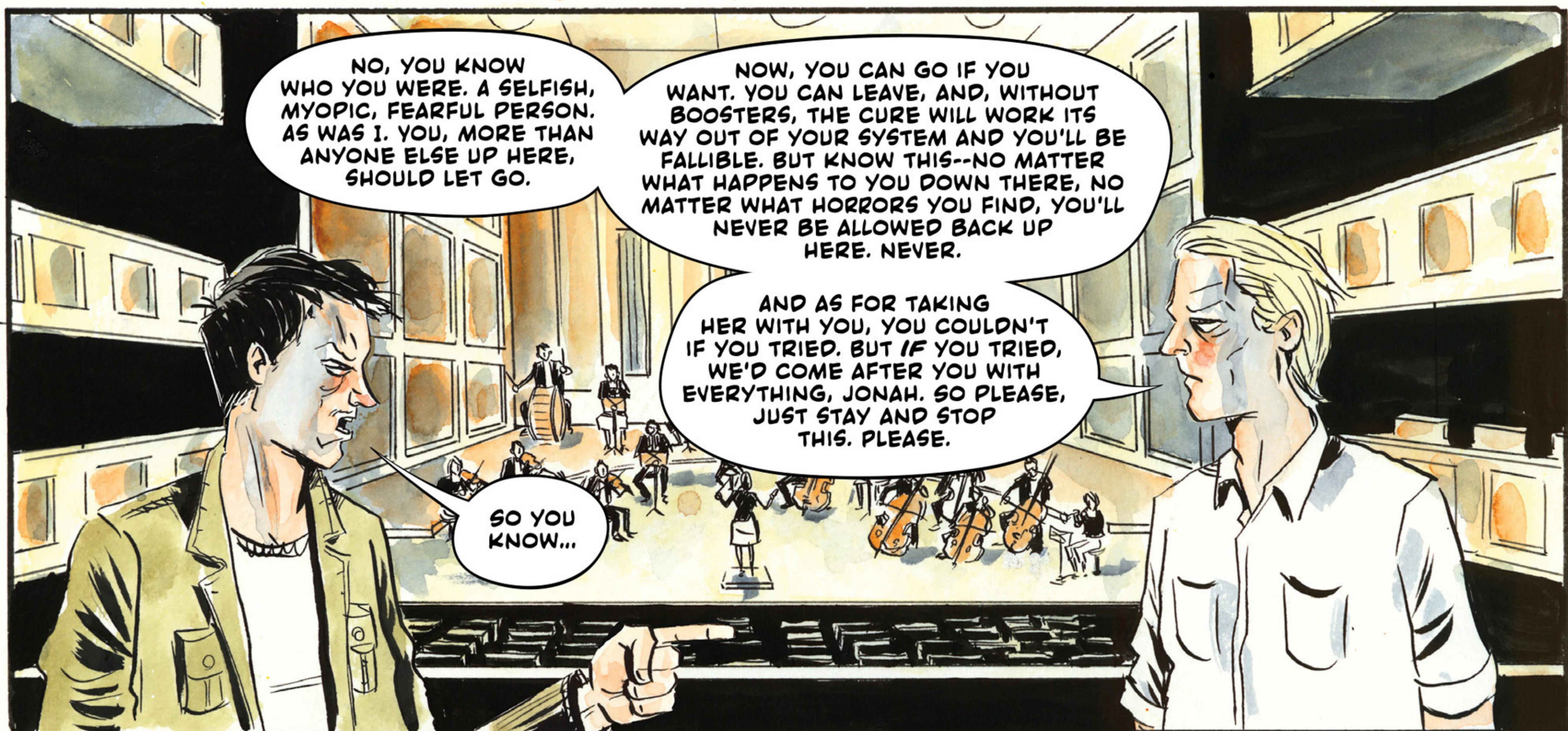






YOU HAVEN'T GIVEN THIS PLACE THE CHANCE IT DESERVES. YOU HAVEN'T FIGURED OUT WHO YOU CAN BE.

I ALREADY KNOW WHO I AM.



NO, YOU KNOW WHO YOU WERE. A SELFISH, MYOPIC, FEARFUL PERSON. AS WAS I. YOU, MORE THAN ANYONE ELSE UP HERE, SHOULD LET GO.

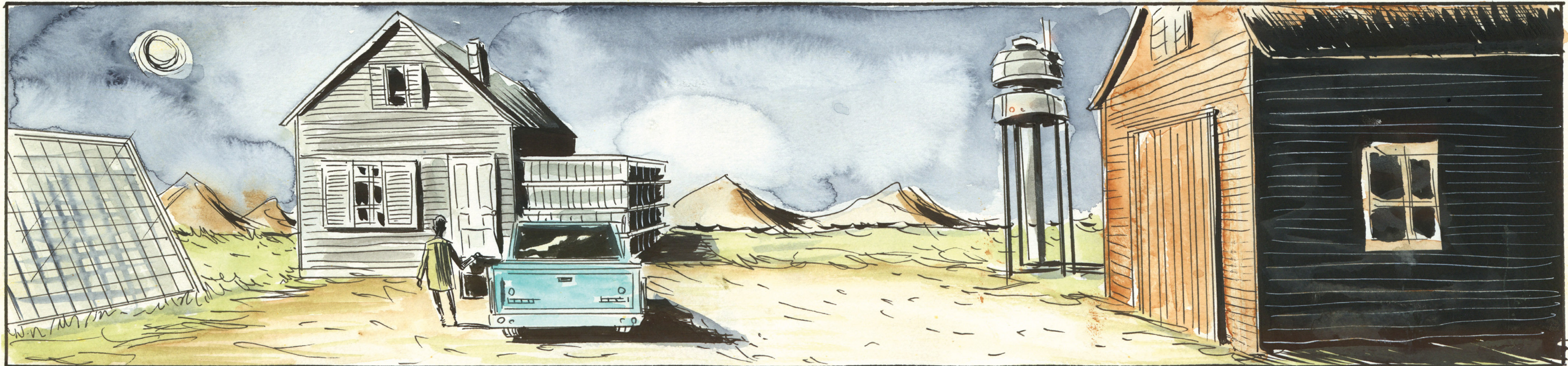
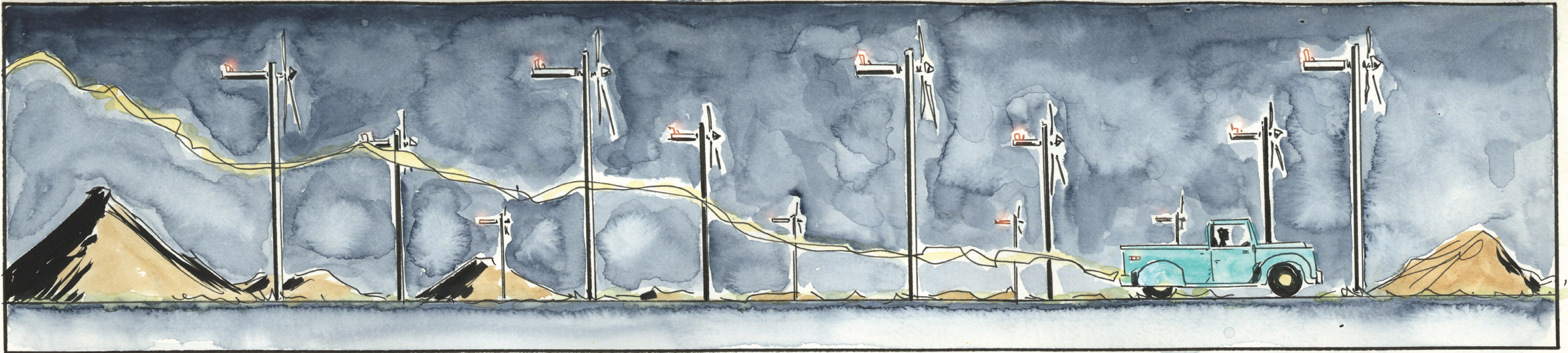
NOW, YOU CAN GO IF YOU WANT. YOU CAN LEAVE, AND, WITHOUT BOOSTERS, THE CURE WILL WORK ITS WAY OUT OF YOUR SYSTEM AND YOU'LL BE FALLIBLE. BUT KNOW THIS--NO MATTER WHAT HAPPENS TO YOU DOWN THERE, NO MATTER WHAT HORRORS YOU FIND, YOU'LL NEVER BE ALLOWED BACK UP HERE. NEVER.

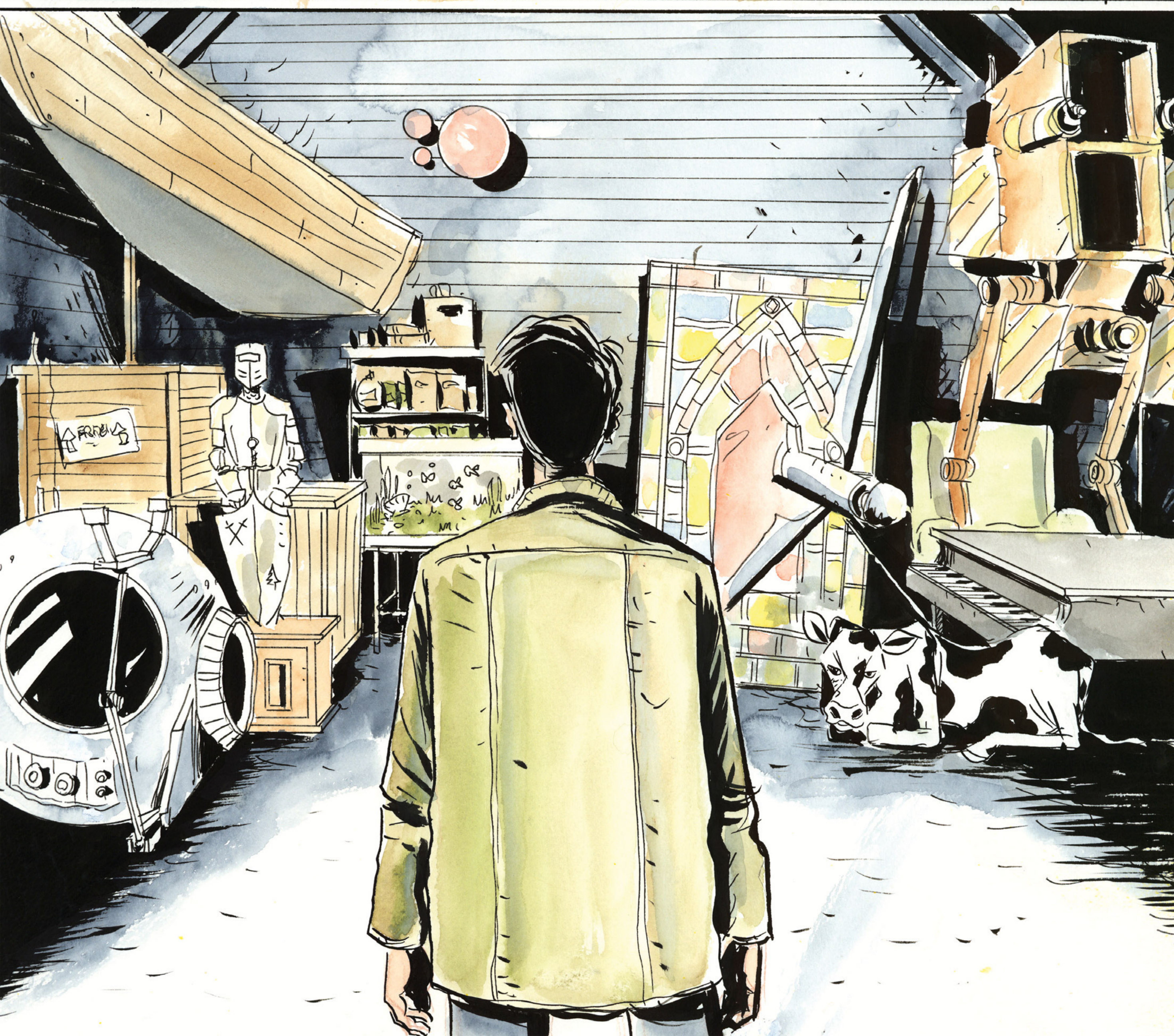
AND AS FOR TAKING HER WITH YOU, YOU COULDN'T IF YOU TRIED. BUT IF YOU TRIED, WE'D COME AFTER YOU WITH EVERYTHING, JONAH. SO PLEASE, JUST STAY AND STOP THIS. PLEASE.

SO YOU KNOW...



THIS MUSIC? IT SOUNDS JUST LIKE EVERYTHING ELSE.







The night after meeting Errant, I can't sleep.

I keep thinking about what he said to me on the deck of the custom. About the possibility of a cure. About the retreat.

I try to push him out of my head, push it away and tell myself it's crazy, tell myself to just get out from under this one, to move, go somewhere else.

There's the girl, too.

Claire.

Sure, she's dying. Basically dead already. And yes, it's the humane thing. But it's all too much. Better to just stop this before it gets too far. Drop the chalk.

But as much as I try, every time I close my eyes I see details of the things Errant described, see them as clear as if I'd encountered them before, as if I'd been waiting for them to appear.

I see the small white clinic in the peaks of the Andes.

I see the laboratory, plain and clean, long, black epoxy counters, fire-resistant glass. Eye washes...nothing elaborate, a place entirely focused on its one task.

I even see the cure as he described it, not the particulars, the gene editing and CRISPR cutters, protein GD11, and young, young blood...I see the effect. I see it working, see telomeres lengthening, cells rounding out. I see people restored and happy, milling about among the clouds.

I think of what he said about memory, about taking only what you want, floating up above your life, its context, the context of everything, about reinventing.

Imagine it, getting to live over and over, remembering what you choose to remember, shedding everything else; all the time in the world to overcome your fears, to learn all you want to learn, to love over and over, to cycle and cycle through until you're truly satisfied and proud and...finished?

I think about that moment, the one I'd told Errant about years earlier. He never mentioned it in our talk, but I knew it was on his mind. I'm talking about that moment just before my mother died, when her perception was going, and for those brief few minutes, she thought we were years in the future, and that I was married and happy, and that my brother was alive, and that she was old and ready to die. And then...that turn. That look of horror on her face. A reverse-eyeball fashion show. Open your eyes and...black. Nothing but black. Because none of it is true. Instead you're just...here. In a hospital bed, in pain, hours from death, and your son will be left behind and your other son will never be born and you will never get to know what happens. Never get to see any of them again, never get an ending. Never get the story to end right. The distance between who you wish to be and who you are...

I get up and go to the window. Outside, the snow has melted, the grounds are bare in the moonlight.

I go out on my porch and realize that Bud, Tommy, and Will are out there, too. They're sitting around Bud's small table, asleep. The funny thing is, they all have their astronaut helmets on. They must have taken them from my place while I was out. I can just make out Bud's face through the shield of his helmet. He's sleeping, maybe drunk, and looks peaceful. All three of them look peaceful, slumped in their chairs, fast asleep, waiting for the day to start.

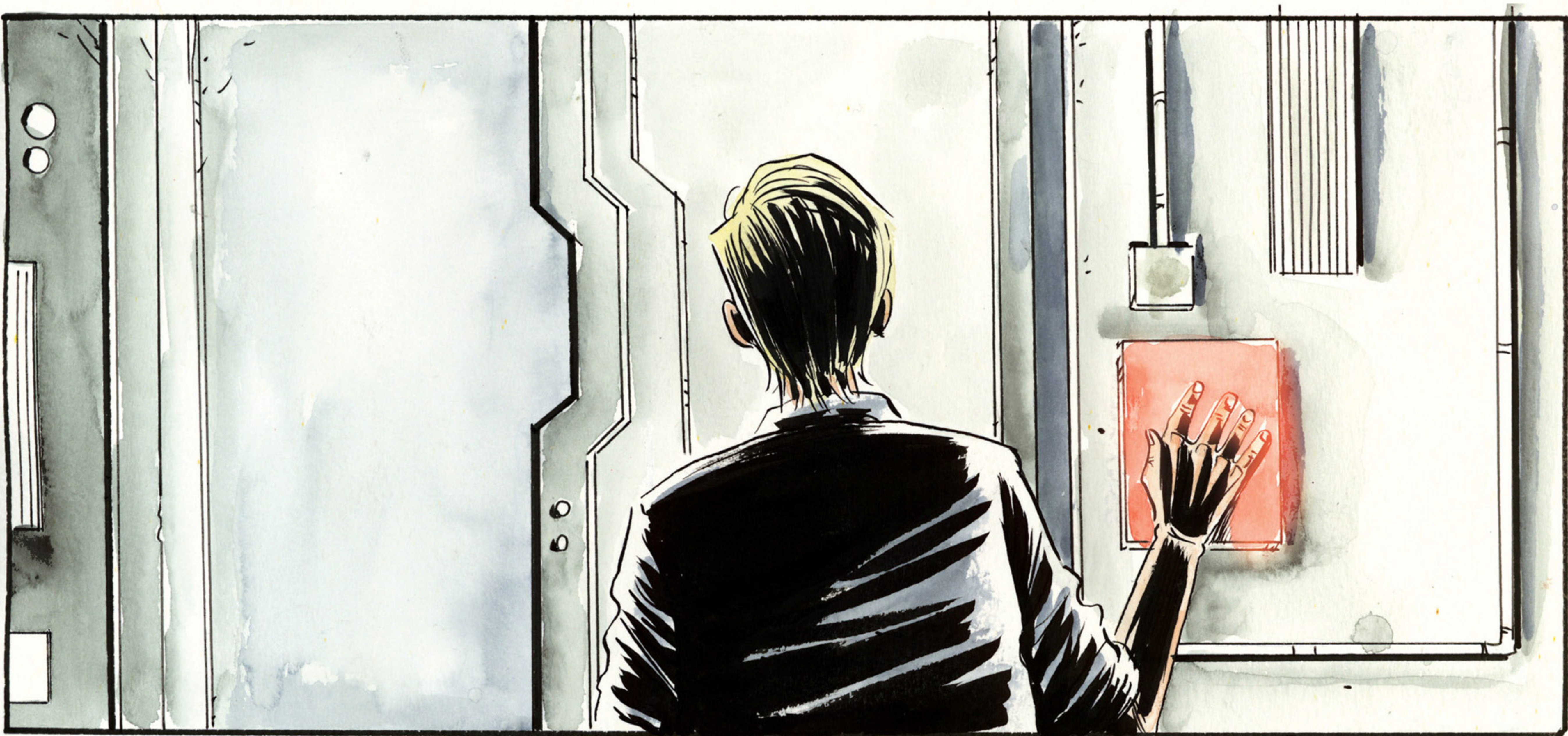
I knew at that moment I would go to this place in the mountains.

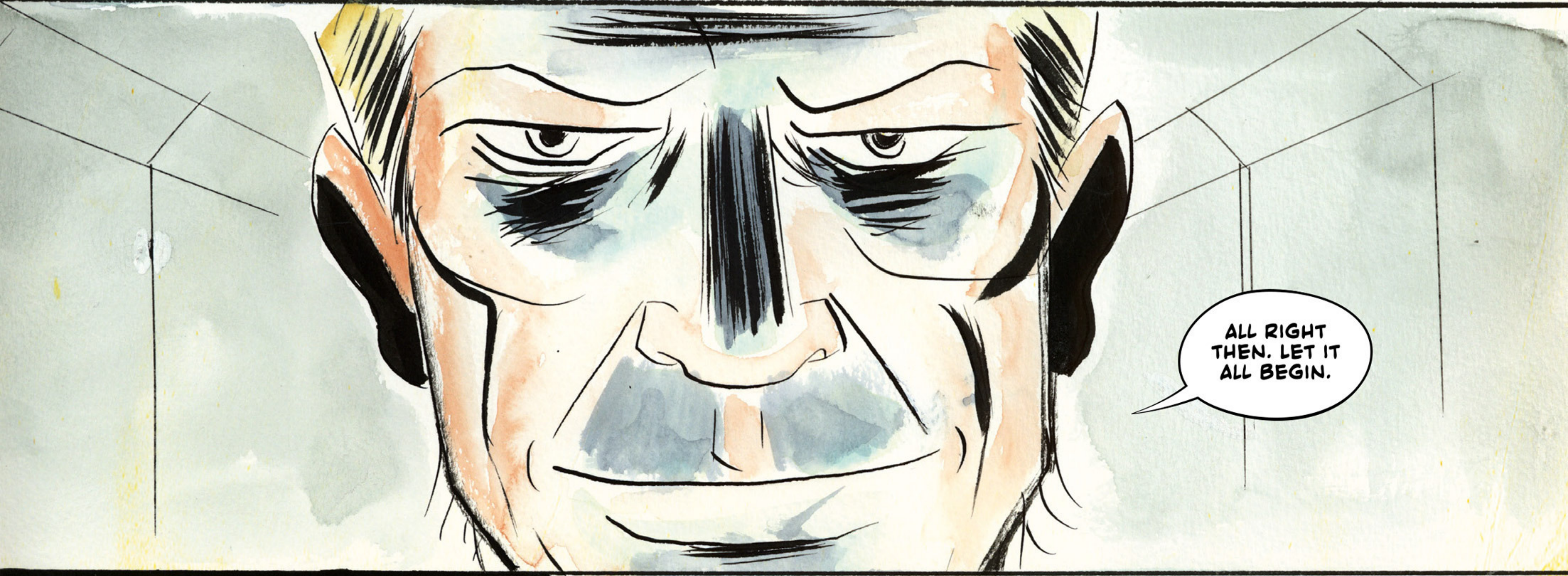
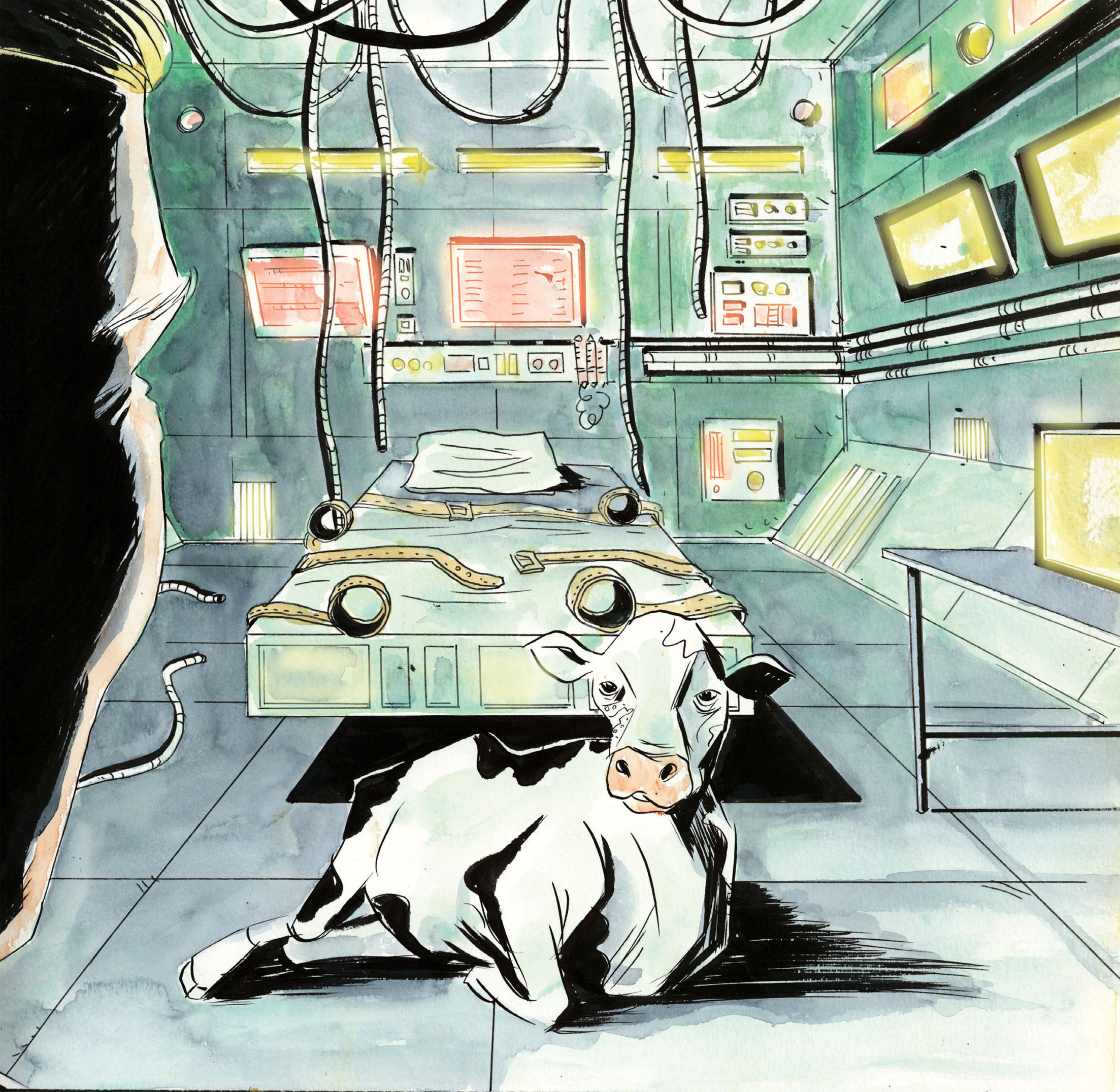
I would go there, and I wouldn't come down until I was better.

Maybe I'd never come down at all.









ALL RIGHT
THEN. LET IT
ALL BEGIN.

TO BE CONCLUDED
IN JANUARY

SCOTT
SNYDER

JEFF
LEMPRE

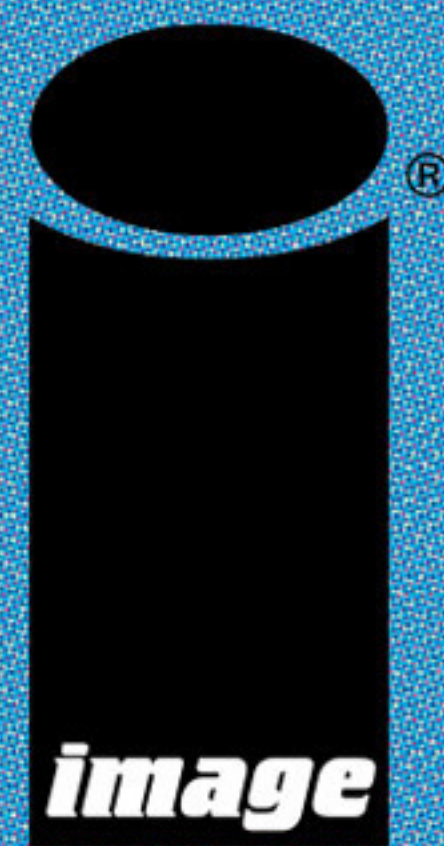


A.D.

AFTER DEATH

BOOK THREE





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